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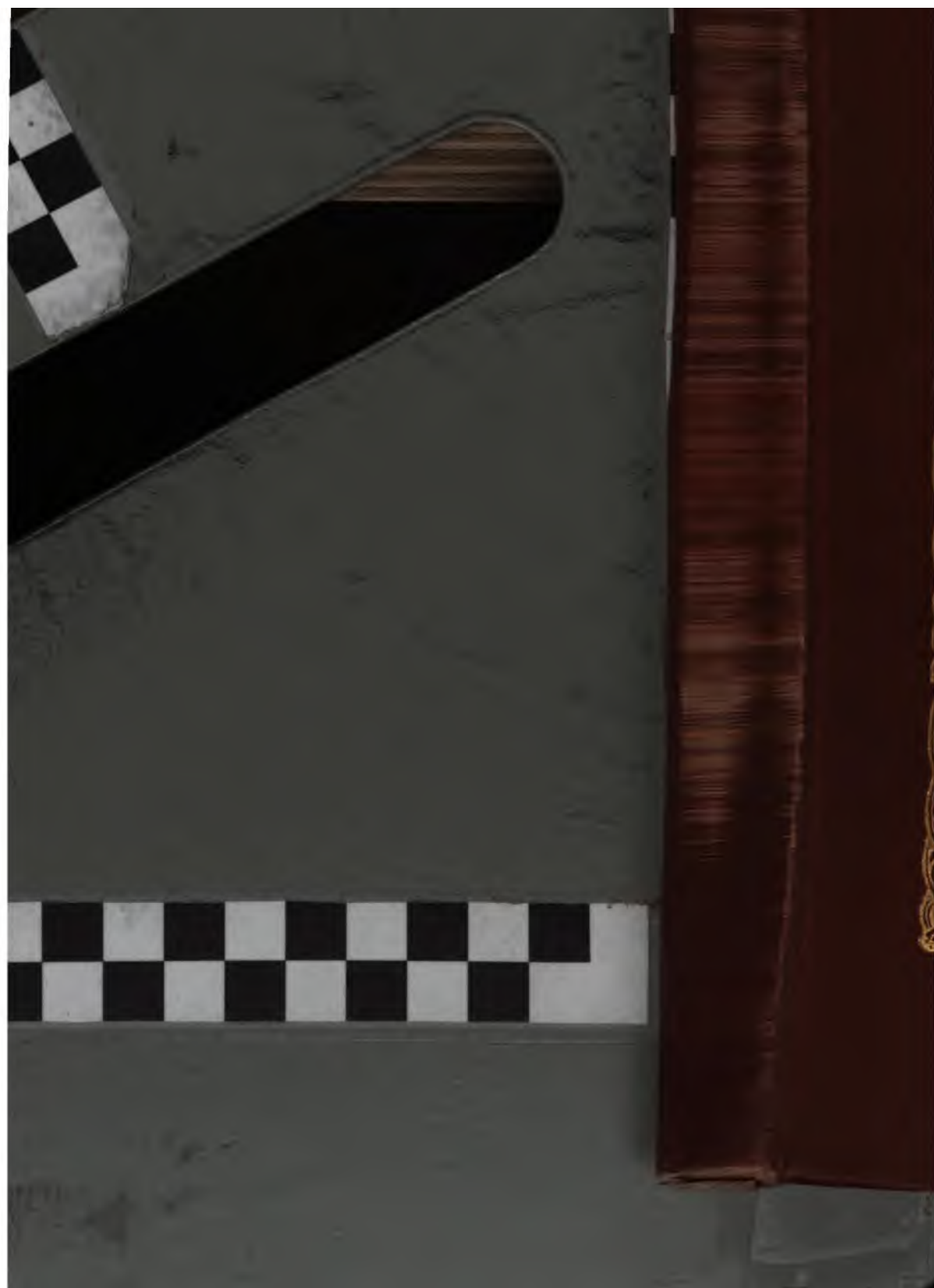
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VIKING CLUB TRANSLATION SERIES—No. 1.
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CORMAC THE SKALD.

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(*Founded in 1892 as the Orkney, Shetland, and Northern Society.*)

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^{Kormak}
THE: LIFE: AND: DEATH: OF:

KORMAC
^{THE} SKALD

BEING: THE: ICELANDIC
KORMÁKS= SAGA

RENDERED: INTO: ENGLISH: BY:

W. S. COLLINGSWOOD: M. A. OXON. &

JÓN: STEFÁNSSON: PH. D. COPENHAGEN.

AUTHORS: OF: A: PILGRIMAGE: TO

THE: SAGA= STEADS: OF: ICELAND:

AND: PRINTED: AND: PUBLISHED: BY

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INTRODUCTION.

I.

The story of a poet, poor and proud, with all the strength and all the weakness of genius. He loves a fine lady, a spoiled child ; who bewitches him, and jilts him, and jilts him again. He fights for her, rhymes for her, and rises for her sake to the height of all that a man in his age could achieve. Then, after years, he has her at his feet, and learns her heartlessness and worthlessness. He bids her farewell ; but dies in the end with her name on his lips.

This is the motive of the book—very modern, we should call it ; dramatic and imaginative, in the sense that it is told by one who was an artist in his craft of saga-telling. The diction is of the simplest. There is no fine writing, but the plot is balanced like a Greek play. The action drives along, in spite of episode, to its close. The ethical result is conveyed without a word of moralizing. The characters are broadly drawn, in types for all time. Without needless detail, there are touches enough of realism. It reads like a novel, and yet it is a true story.

II.

The saga is really a biography of an important historical personage,* the “Life and Works” of one of the greatest among the Viking Skalds.

* The following is the chronology given in Vald. Asmundarson's edition of the Saga (Rvk., 1893):—

Ogmund emigrates to Iceland (chap. ii.)	...	...	...	931-34
Cormac born (chap. ii.)	...	...	... about	937
He meets Steingerd (chap. iii.)	...	...	... about	956
He fights Bersi (chap. x.)	...	...	...	958
His first voyage (chap. xviii.)	...	...	...	959
He goes viking (chap. xviii.)	...	...	in the summer of	960
He stays with Harald Greyfell (chap. xix.)	...	...	...	961-62
He returns to Iceland (chap. xix.)	...	...	...	962
Fights between Cormac and Thorvard (chap. xxii.)	...	...	...	963-64
Cormac's second voyage (chap. xxiv.)	...	...	...	964
Harald's expedition to Permia (chap. xxv.)	...	...	...	965
Cormac's death (chap. xxvii.)	...	...	... about	967
Fight between Bersi and Steinar (chap. xii.)	...	...	...	976 (?)
Bersi slays Thorkel Toothgnasher (chap. xiv.)	...	...	...before	980
The adventure of Steinvör (chap. xv.) and Váli (chap. xvi.)	...	...	...	985

Cormac is mentioned in the *Landnámabók*, the "Domesday book of Iceland"; and in the saga of Egil Skallagrimsson his parentage is traced.* In the list of poets, *Skáldatal*, of the Prose Edda by Snorri Sturluson, he is named among the poets of King Harald Greyfell of Norway, who reigned from 960 to 965 A.D., and among those of Earl Sigurd of Hladir, who died 962. It is known that he wrote a poem on Sigurd, the *Sigurdardrápa*, of which some fragments are preserved; one stanza in the *Heimskringla*, and six half stanzas in the Prose Edda. Our saga is not a romance founded on these materials; for it tells at length the story of Cormac's connection with the king, while it makes no mention of his dealings with the earl.

At all points it touches real persons and events. The statements are historical, though here and there a little confused, and sometimes heightened or blurred, as we might expect. But even when the tale verges on the marvellous it is rather owing to a superstitious interpretation of natural facts than to the insertion of downright inventions. It is not a work of fiction, romantic as it is.

III.

The book as we have it was put together in the later half of the thirteenth century, between 1250 and 1300. Not very much later the copy was made which is still to be seen in the famous vellum codex formerly called the Book of Mödruvellir, and now known as AM. 132 folio, in the Arna-Magnæan collection of the University Library at Copenhagen. It is a volume of various sagas, beautifully transcribed, with initials and ornaments in red and green, dating from the early part of the fourteenth century.

There is also a fragment on vellum, AM. 162 F folio, consisting of two small pages, very illegible, and apparently later than the Book of Mödruvellir. Beside these there are eighteen paper manuscripts of more recent date, in various libraries.

The saga was edited with a Latin translation by Thorgrim Gudmundsson, and notes on the verses by Gunnar Pálsson and Finn Magnússon (published

*Chapter 80 of the edition of Reykjavík, 1892; in the Rev. W. C. Green's English translation the corresponding passage is chapter lxxxv., but the details of the pedigree are omitted.

at Copenhagen in 1832). An edition of part was given in "*Antiquités Russes*" (Copenhagen, 1850-52) and a Danish translation of that part was printed by N. M. Petersen in his "*Historiske Fortællinger*." In 1886 appeared the edition of Professor Th. Möbius of Kiel. The verses have been discussed and emended by various other scholars, as Dr. Bugge, Dr. Jón Thorkelsson, Dr. Gísli Brynjólfsson, Dr. Konrad Gíslason, Dr. Björn Olsen, Dr. Finnur Jónsson: and the results of their labours are now accessible in the handy edition by Valdimar Asmundarson, published in 1893 at Reykjavík by Sigurdur Kristjánsson, for the price of 50 *aurar* or sixpence three farthings.

There has been no English translation: but in Bohn's well-known volume of "*Mallet's Northern Antiquities*" (1847) a flippant sketch of the plot was given, in the quizzing style of the day.

IV.

What we have done is to translate the last edition of the fourteenth century copy of a book written some half century earlier.

But even beyond that date we can trace it back; for the unknown scribe who made our book was not merely writing to dictation: he was compiling from earlier manuscripts.

A late thirteenth-century fragment known as *Íslendingadrápa*, giving short accounts of sagas then extant, mentions three which relate to the actors in this drama. There was a saga of Cormac, pure and simple: a saga of his rival Bersi, with which our scribe has patched his work, somewhat to the detriment of the unities: and a third saga of Midfirth-Skeggi, Cormac's guardian, who also comes into our story. The gist of the last saga is preserved in *Landnáma*.

We have reason to believe, therefore, that there was a short saga of Cormac before ours was compiled, and it would seem that the early and rude language of the first was preserved in the later book, which is "the most primitive piece of Icelandic prose-writing that has come down to us. The style is so rough and broken that it is at times hardly intelligible, from the sudden transitions and want of connection which occur not only in its

wording but even in its matter. It is a coarse rough story of coarse rough life." So says the late Dr. Gudbrand Vigfússon.*

We may take it then that we have bits of twelfth-century prose, collected somewhat later, and not much re-written, though pieced with other matter. There were therefore about two hundred years between the events and their committal to writing; during which time the tale was told from mouth to mouth,—for sagas were not set down in runes; that would have been far too tedious a business.

But it does not follow that faithful transmission was impossible. In those days, as in the days of which Plato tells, before Thoth invented letters and "destroyed the art of memory,"—in those primitive days saga-telling was an art and a craft, such as we possess no longer. Local history and family records were matters of importance in each district, and the traditions about them crystallized at an early date into fixed forms, told and retold at the fireside, to an audience always ready to catch the teller in a slip, and to correct the least detail, like children listening to a well-remembered legend.

V.

Not only is the story true, but, according to the testimony of the critics, the verses in it are genuine songs of the Viking age; corrupt and puzzling as Pindar, but still such as may have been the real utterances of Cormac and Bersi and the rest. Their language is not the mediæval Icelandic of the literary age. They contain genuine tenth-century forms, such as *glíkr* for *líkr* (song 36); *goll* for *gull* (in 63 and 76); *rinna* for *renna* (in 9, 19, and 70); and *batra* for *betra* (in 30).

It adds greatly to the interest of the book when it is found to bring us face to face with the life-story and the mind's work of a once-celebrated poet, so removed from us, and yet in some ways so nearly akin. In bodily features, in mental structure, in the language he used, he was not so different from us as any poet of the Greeks, or Hebrews, or Orientals. In material civilization and habits of life he was not at all unlike an old English country-

* Prolegomena to *Sturlungasaga*, p. liv.

man,—say one of the eighteenth century sea-captains, who farmed at home and fought abroad. He is actually said to have been the founder of Scarborough, *Skardaborg*, in England, though we do not vouch for the fact that he was the first builder of a castle on that particular site which Turner painted so peaceful and sunny, with the cockle-girl paddling in the fringe of the ripple, and the starfish gleaming on the beach,—where now the trippers crowd and the bands play. Some *burg*, somewhere on our shores, he and his brother Skardi (the nickname for Thorgils) may well have built: and somewhere in Ireland he died and was buried,*—he only of the great Viking Skalds haunting our islands, except Hallfred, whose tomb was in the churchyard at Iona.

And yet there is one fact that removes him from us, far more distantly than Cædmon or Cynewulf. They were Christians; their thoughts ran in grooves familiar to ours; their poetical ideas and images arose more or less out of the Bible, and the literature associated with Christian teaching; while Cormac was a heathen, a pagan of the pre-mediæval type, quite alien in his mental environment from any Irish bard or Saxon singer whose "Life and Works" we can read. It is this great difference, in the midst of much resemblance to ourselves, that makes Cormac so interesting a study, and suggests the question,—how far may we take these verses as representing his own utterances?

VI.

There is no need to be very sceptical about it, strange though it seems that the rhymes, often extemporized in the heat of action or of passion, should be remembered and set down; not to say that verse, elaborate as this in structure, was composed in an age we call dark and rude, and by one who was himself a typical Viking.

But the real poet does not need pen and paper, nor the midnight oil; and real verse, with the true note in it, rings in the ear, easier to remember

* Killed by a "Scot" of huge stature. Some commentators assume that his own poem is in error, when it says that he fought that day in *Ireland*; not remembering that Scots lived in Ireland in the tenth century.

than forget. The Skaldic gift, the power of the lyrical cry, is common to all races and ages : commoner, perhaps, among folk who are not burdened with scholarly aims and methods.

It may be heredity from Viking ancestors that has given our Lake district peasantry some touch of Skaldship. It has been a great feature in the inner life of our dalesfolk, in the old days before the school board and the cheap magazine came in. There were many rough uneducated rustics whose more passionate speeches went out in verse ; not lengthy or literary, indeed, but often with neat form, and always with point and force. Their names and their verses are still remembered in the gossip of the countryside, even after the best part of two centuries has passed. There was John Audland, who lived at Crosthwaite by the Lyth, early in the 18th century. They tell you he used to frequent "The Sign of the Dog," in Dalton-gate, at Ulverston—it would not be hard to write these names as Old Norse—and once, turning homeward penniless, gave his promissory note by word of mouth in these terms :—

" I, John Audland,
Before I gang hence,
Awe Betty Woodburn
Just six and tvea-pence,
And Thorsda' com' sennet
I'll pay t' ald score,
And wha kens but I may
Spend twice as mich more."

But he rhymed better when he lost a law-suit ; for these descendants of the Northmen, like the Norman peasants of France, are litigious ; and he spoke this song, punctuating, no doubt, with his holly-staff :—

" God mead men,
And men mead mney ;
God mead bees,
And bees mead honey ;
But t' Divil himself
Mead lawyers and 'tornies,
And pleaced 'em i' U'ston [Ulverston]
And Dalton i' Forness."

This is very nearly the old Edda metre, and its emphasis and parallelism and metaphor suggest more than a chance resemblance to the ancient Skalds. We are in the twentieth century ; this was spoken in the eighteenth, and has been remembered almost as long as Cormac's songs before they were written down.

We need say no more of old Jamie Muckelt, and sailor Dixon of Coniston, a regular Viking Skald of the Nelson age ; but the modern instances surely make the ancient tale believable and real.

VII.

If these owed their gift in any measure to some touch of Viking heredity, Cormac himself owed much to Irish ancestry, like so many Icelanders. It was the blending of races that made them a great nation in their prime—greater than the Norse of Norway, from whence they sprang. The Northern heroes were mostly of mixed blood ; the name of Njál is the Irish Nial ; Gunnar was an Irishman's great-grandson ; Kjartan was the namesake of his grandfather, King Muirceartach, *Myrkjartan*, as the Northmen spoke it ; and Cormac also is a well-known Irish name, *Corbmac*. We, in translating, spell it throughout with a C, as in Irish and English and old Icelandic, and not with the K of more modern Scandinavian orthography ; for it is still a living name among the people from whom the Northmen borrowed it, and "Mac-Cormac," "McCormick," are familiar in the directories of English towns.

There was a very famous Corbmac mac Cuilennain of Cashel, slain in 903 A.D., and greatly mourned, say the Irish Annals, "for he was a king, a bishop, an anchorite, a scribe, and profoundly learned in the Scotie tongue." He was the author of the well known glossary called *Sanasan Chornaic*, in which he derives his own name from *corb*, 'a chariot,' and *mac*, 'a son,' because the earliest of the name, living in the first century of our era, was born in a waggon.

Another Cormac, son of Art, son of Conn of the Hundred Battles, became king of all Ireland (according to the Four Masters) in 227 A.D., conquered Scotland 240, and died in 266, after forty years' reign. "Cormack was absolutely the best king that ever reigned in Ireland before himself," say the Annals of Clonmacnois, with delightful native idiom. "He was a famous

author in laws, synchronisms, and history," say the Four Masters, with no less felicity; "for it was he that established law, rule and direction for each science, and for each covenant according to propriety; and *it is his laws that governed all that adhered to them to the present time.*" He lived in the century before St. Patrick, but it is hinted that he was a worshipper of the true God, and a martyr to the faith. Nay, Patrick, himself, in the Irish poem of Flann Mainistrech, is said to be great-great-grandson of a Cormac Mor (the great) an earlier and still less historical name. In 496 died a Saint Cormac, successor to St. Patrick in the archbishopric of Armagh: and after that the name became common in Ireland.

Others beside our Skald bore it in Iceland. His nephew Cormac was living at the old home about the year 1000, and soon after a Curmaker (Kormákr) went on pilgrimage to Rome, and is mentioned as one of 39 pilgrims from Híslant (Iceland) in the *Necrologium Augiense*, the list of the dead at the monastery of Reichenau in Germany,—the oldest foreign list of Scandinavian names.*

VIII.

Cormac the Skald got his name from his grandfather, a great man under King Harald Fairhair, and flourishing about 900 A.D. There is no hint in the Saga that he was connected with Ireland, but he may have been the son of a marriage between a Norse invader and an Irish princess; for we know that such marriages were frequent.

The elder brother of the Skald died in infancy, and was named after Earl Fródi, his grandfather. The younger brother was called Thorgils, and this is the name of the first sea-king who effected a settlement in Ireland. The Four Masters tell us that Tuirgeis, lord of the Gall (foreigners, vikings), burned Clonmacnois, but was in 843 taken prisoner and drowned. Duál Mac Fírbis retails the tradition that he enthroned his wife Ota (Audr) on the altar of Clonmacnois abbey church, to "give answers." This *Tuirgeis*, Latinized into Turgesius, appears to be a corruption of Thorgils or Thorgisl, who thus founded a kingdom in the northern parts of Ireland a generation

*Diplomatarium Islandicum, p. 71

before the birth of the elder Cormac, and his name would naturally be popular in the families of his followers.

There are other interesting traces of Irish influence in the philology of Cormac's poems: in the words *bjöd*, land; *diar*, in Cormac's "Lay of Earl Sigurd," meaning gods, or priests; *kellir*, a coif or wimple; *ld*, hair; *hlúki*, a term of abuse; Thjálfí, the Delver, a follower of Thor in the Edda.

And then, Cormac is a thorough Irishman, himself: witness his dark eyes and tufted hair, the reproach of the Norse girls; his persuasive tongue and flashing readiness of retort; his stubbornly inconsequent and unpractical habit of mind; his impulsive, wayward, perverse, faithful heart; and the fancy and the feeling that make him what we find him to be—so great an artist in the peculiar form of verse which he inherited from the Irish bards.

Of verse-forms, as the Irish used them, there is no need to attempt any description here; but we must try to give some account of the metres employed by Cormac.

IX.

Reckoning two quarter-stanzas and three half-stanzas as separate pieces, there are in all eighty-five poems or songs in the Saga; of which 65 are by Cormac, (one, No. 3, is also attributed to Gunnlaug Ormstunga) and one is a parody on Cormac: fifteen are by Bersi, and two by Steinar: one is a duet, so to say, with Cormac by Steingerd, and one is Narfi's share in a similar duet.

This last, No. 11, and its answer, No. 12, by Cormac, are in the metre called *hnugg-hent*, that is, "apocopate" or clipped. A glance at our translation (Nos. 11 and 12) will explain the scanning, for we have tried to facsimile these couplets in English. It seems as though Narfi, a rough retainer of a not very important chief, had stumbled into verse by accident; and Cormac was ready with instantaneous reply in the same form, matching the accident with artifice.

Two other songs are in *fornyrdislag*, the "metre of ancient proverbs," otherwise called *Kvidu-hátt*, the "metre of epic poems or ballads," such as we know in the *Völuspá* of the Poetical Edda, or *Beowulf*, or *Piers Plowman*,

or (with some differences) in the rhymes above quoted from John Audland. These two songs are (38) Steinar's satire on Bersi's swimming, and (48) Bersi's lament on his old age, a song which, according to *Laxdæla-saga*, he had sung before. One summer afternoon when folk were busy in the hay, the old viking had been left at home to take care of the baby, being, it would seem, "fast" with rheumatism. As he lay in his bunk in the wainscot of the rude hall at Bessatunga, the baby, sturdy little brother of the great Kjartan, wriggled until its cradle upset: and the old man could not stir to set it right, but sang this song, which must have become a household word. These old proverbial metres we have turned rather freely into short rhymed lines, keeping some of the original jingle.

The rest of the songs are in what the Skalds named *dróttkvætt*, that is "sung before the court," a heroic metre, used in the *drápa* or ode in praise of a king or hero, or the gods, or even Christ and the Saints. Such poems were intended as Pindar's were; made to order, complimentary, conventional; but their artificial form did not preclude natural feeling, in Cormac as in Pindar.

This form, with its trochaic beat and triple alliteration, was taken directly from the court bards of Ireland. It came into vogue about Cormac's time, he being acknowledged in his age as the greatest master of the craft, the laureate of Earl and King, as well as the extemporizer of the clever verses recorded in his *Saga*.

The shape of the *dróttkvædi* is like this:—any words will do to illustrate the metre:—

Hail, thou hardy sailor,
 Hero-poet fearless;
 Loyal lover, royal
 Lord of harp and sword-blade
 Faint the song is flung us
 Far away they harp it;—
 Crown the warlike Cormac
 King of Northern singers!

Any words will do, but the lilt of the metre is obvious; it is a triumphal march,—*maestoso*; and it has, besides, a choral richness as of a part song, or

rather, it reminds one of the echoing dome of the Pisan Baptistery, where one voice becomes an orchestra. No wonder the Skalds were a power in the state, when they sang great deeds to such tunes: no wonder Skaldship was Odin's wine!

X.

Let us take the verse to pieces and see how it is made.

The stanza has always these eight lines; it is always broken in the middle, like a sonnet; unless, like a sonnet, the break is bridged over on purpose. Each half stanza is two couplets, and the couplet is the unit, containing a three-fold alliteration, as in all early English verse. But beside the alliteration of initials there is—in the stricter form of the metre—a rhyme in each line, not at the end of the words, but inside them, as in *Hail* and *Sail-or*, *Her-o*, and *fear-less*. Indeed, the third line is faulty, for *loyal* and *royal* rhyme too much; the effect is too coarse; for this trick is meant to be subtle, and the rhyme is often a mere assonance, as in the fifth line, *song* and *flung*.

Further, the alliteration may come anywhere in the first line of the couplet, but it must be at the beginning of the second, except where there is "epanacrusis," the back-stroke got by a short syllable before the emphasis of the start, as if we wrote "*Thcu* hero-poet," etc.

Similarly, the rhyme may come anywhere in the first line of the couplet, but in the second line it must occupy the last foot.

One more rule, and the hardest to keep in English imitations, is that alliterative initials must be strictly alike; a double consonant does not match with a single one; *crown* does not truly alliterate with *Cormac*, and *flung* does not match *far*. An initial vowel, however, alliterates only with a *different* vowel, as in No. 68, which we attempt to represent thus:—

"I paid her an ore at the ayre,
That the art of my foe should not prosper."

The structure of the verse is far from simple, but that is not all. The better Skalds, like Cormac, were never satisfied without some clever parallelism of idea, some dainty balance of thought and word, epigrammatic or

antithetic. The result was a form of composition as complicated and as difficult as those interwoven designs, learned by the Vikings at the same time from the same source—those wonderful patterns, severe and strict in their symmetry, but varied with infinite charm, and carried out with an ingenuity which we can hardly hope to recover ; for it was the expression of the Viking mind, of its passion in love and war, and, what we take to be no less characteristic, its patience of restraint by laws and loyalty.

XI.

As Cormac without the verse would be like Hamlet without the Ghost, we must be allowed a few words on the songs and on our attempts to translate them.

In illustration of this symmetry, take for example No. 2, in which the poet's reflections intrude, so naturally, on the picture he draws. The thoughts arising in his mind at the vision of beauty are just hinted in parentheses which occupy the third line of each half stanza. The two half stanzas are parallel in their descriptions also, one giving the eyes, and one the feet of the figure he beholds ; and the last lines of both parts contain the same rhymes. We have turned this, in the text, with some attempt at a literal rendering, always in fear lest we might be supposed to put more picturesqueness into the ancient verse than it truly contains. But Cormac's meaning and the matching of line for line is shown in this alternative translation :—

Burning from a maiden's face,
Stars upon me gleaming fair
(Laugh who list ; I laugh not, I!)
Over the fence of the firelit hall.

Slender ankles, maiden grace,
Tall and lovely, spied I there
(Thrill to age not ere I die!)
On the threshold, anigh the wall.

The same mosaic work, the parenthesis in the third lines, is often found, as in No. 10, where, for the sake of clearness, we have passed on the insertion to the last lines of the quatrains.

We have said that the parentheses occupy the third lines of the half stanzas. That is a rough way of putting it, for the sake of clearness again ; but when you come to examine the songs composed on this pattern you will find that Cormac is just as anxious as a mediæval illuminator to avoid vulgar symmetry, and conceals his art by making the parenthesis of the second half overflow its line by a couple of syllables, as a good designer makes his pattern overlap the border, once in a way, at a chosen point.

We have to neglect many of these niceties, and to omit or simplify the complications of the original, thereby losing much of the curiosity or preciousity of the Icelandic. English verse, if it is to be lucid, hardly bears much parenthesis. We have no grammatical inflexions to show which words group together, and we depend on the order. Every schoolboy knows how he must rearrange a sentence of Horace, for that reason ; and it is just the same with Icelandic, in which the sentence sorts itself, like Latin, by its case-endings, and, like German, can wait for its close long after the English ear has lost patience.

For the neat matching of two quatrains, see No. 7 : " Her eyes . . . are worth so many hundreds of silver ; her hair . . . is worth so many." The echo is got in another way in No. 15, where in the first part he calls Steingerd (if we take Dr. Björn Olsen's reading) " the goddess who pours the wine," *i.e.*, the bountiful, hospitable lady ; and in the second part he calls himself " the one who pours the drink of the gods," the intoxicating thought, poetry. He continually finds new ways of hinting a parallelism between himself and his lady-love, as in the close of No. 59 :—

" The wielder of the falchion, the charmed flash of steel,
And the wearer of the treasure, the deep-sea flame of gold."

—All through the verses the same symmetry recurs, either as parallelism or contrast of ideas, but always with careful variety of expression, and no tautology. Like the trick of reflection and repetition in painting, it never fails of its effect. Sometimes, as in No. 56, the famous " Song of the Surf," it is almost magical.

XII.

There is another characteristic of old Northern verse which has never

quite had justice done to it in translation, though it has often been analysed at greater length than we need devote to it here : we mean the use of Kennings.

The Skalds liked a roundabout way of expressing themselves ; many poets do. They called a lady the Freyja, or other goddess, with the necklace, or bracelet, or beautiful dress ; or the Gerda, or Valkyrie, or nymph, who spins the wool, sews the tapestry, or pours the wine. Men are called gods of the sword or spear, or "staves" of the spear, because they carry it ; and so the "trees" of anything they "bear." The primitive custom of hanging offerings on sacred trees, fetish trees, may have suggested the idea ; and so, when we read of the Fir-tree wreathed in silk or gold, or carrying shields, we see a picture by no means absurd, though alien to our current coinage of poetical diction, and a symbol, ready to the mind of those days, for a lord or a lady.

The meaning is less obvious when these Kennings allude to mythology which the modern reader does not know. We learn at school enough Greek and Roman mythology to recognise Jove and Cupid, the labours of Hercules, and the tortures of Tantalus ; and almost all European poetry is full of these allusions, so familiar as to be almost unnoticed. But we are pulled up by the Skald's phrases referring to the religion he knew, as in the "Song of the Surf," where "Haki's blue realm" refers to a certain sea-king, and "Thjálf's isles" mean the spadefuls tossed up by the delver of the deep : *waves*, of course.

When such mythology is brought into a Kenning which is already complex we are puzzled until we know more. The lady of the gold necklet becomes the—such and such goddess by name—who wears the treasure of the Niblungs hid in the depths of the Rhine ; and so forth. But it is not fair to call these turns of thought "frigid conceits," or to omit them in translation, though it is immensely difficult to render them without lengthy paraphrase. For example, we should like to expand No. 4, thus :—

She's like an oak tree, golden dight, that bears a cup so sweet,
And never she turned her eyes away, and still must our glances meet ;
I fain would hide my doubting and the strife of a heart in pain,
But I may not forget the mighty one that binds me in her chain.

O fair in her wreathen necklet! and fortunate she no less
 To sway the roving hearts of men like roving knaves of the chess;
 For out by the carven door-post the light of her eyebeam blazed,
 From the bearded head of Hagbard—and it was on me she gazed!

There is nothing in this but what is suggested in the original; the picturesqueness is all Cormac's; the appositeness of the Kennings comes out in the paraphrase. But it is paraphrase, for it renders by a long and modern metre the crisp, terse brevity of the Icelandic.

Again, to give the full force of No. 10, on Steingerd's comb, we might venture on something like this:—

Her hair is like the deep sward that grows on a dewy howe,
 And here's the dart that pierces the leafage of her brow;
 She reached it forth so freely, she gave it me so kind,
 And that dainty carven comb of hers I'll ever bear in mind!
 Unknown I stood before her, and found her sweet and fair—
 A tree, I call her, all adorned in the spoil of the dragon's lair—
 A goddess decked in gold that gleams with the shine of the sunlit sea,
 And never can I forget her, to love her while life shall be!

It is intensely artificial, but not at all frigid; and if the Icelandic words were not so curt and so packed with meaning this would represent them better than a shorter metre. Once or twice we have found it impossible to put the sense more tersely, and have allowed ourselves this long ballad form; but it gives a modern style to the verse which in some ways falsifies it.

XIII.

May we take the reader into our confidence about our struggles with these difficult songs?

People often think they have said the last word on translation when they recommend "plain English." But there are several sorts of plain English, and a few examples may be not unamusing. We need hardly say that we could not turn Cormac into his own *dróttkvætt*. So rigorous a measure is difficult to write at all in English; and to facsimile the Icelandic verses would be quite hopeless: it would be like copying a Velasquez head in mosaic on the same scale. Nearly everything would have to be left out. So we tried

to represent the metre and alliteration, only turning the internal rhyme into terminal rhyme, thus :—

(No. 7).

One bright flame that flashes
From her shadowy lashes,
In a wight so winsome,
Would three hundred ransom?
Curls I saw her combing,
Clad in white i' the gloaming
—Worlds of worth are in them—
Would five hundred win them?

(No. 8).

Worth wide Iceland to me
Is one that doth undo me;
Denmark's seagirt duneland,
Doughty, warlike Hunland,—
England add, nor shall you
Over-rate her value,
Aye, to eke the tale of it:
Ireland, and you fail of it!

Of course, this fails of it, by the obvious difficulty of the last couplet, which ends in dactyls instead of trochees, and alliterates on vowels like the preceding couplet, which is against rule. But we plodded on :—

(No. 9).

Saddle my steed and back him
—Spur him, Tosti, thwack him!
O'er down and moorland dreary
Drive him till he's weary.
Gayer it is together
Than gathering ewe and wether
O'er stony steep and valley,
With Steingerd here to dally.

“Thwack” may be allowed, because the verse is meant to be petulant and half-comic: but compare this with the true *dróttkvæði* given above, and this rhyming jingle rings false and thin: not to say that it is a dance in chains.

Well then, to fall back on the good old octosyllabic.

(No. 13).

Is't thou should foul thy master's meat
 With words unclean and names unsweet ?
 Thou blundering bowman, is't for thee
 To aim thy witless jokes at me ?

(No. 14).

The cowherd yonder asked of me
 —An upstart fool that poked and pried
 He'll sit awhile at home, red-eyed—
 How like you kettle-worms ? quoth he.
 One thing I know, the dirty knave,
 The rook in mud-bespattered weed
 That spreads the muck upon the mead,
 Got the reply a dog would have.

But this metre is always tempting us into a sort of epigrammatic neatness which is not the real neatness of Cormac : it is a French style,—no longer the mead of Odin, but claret. So we tried the same “apocopate,” or clipped : to get the trochaic beat.

(No. 17).

There they sit, my fearful foes,
 Whet their swords and keep them close !
 Churls and cowards, howso fain,
 They will never be my bane.
 Though we met in open field,
 Though the twain should bid me yield,
 T'would be but as if the ewe
 Bade the wolf to derring-do !

Poor Cormac becomes a very minor poet. Bless thee, Cormac, they have translated thee !

To get rid of this stilted style, we tried another sort of plain English : but it turned into doggerel.

(No. 22).

Look to thyself and stick to thy horse,
 Hold to thy shield for better, for worse :

Hie away home and haste, for fear
 This mallet of mine come nigh thy ear.
 Bring no more tattle of feast or play
 Though thou had tiding of seven in a day,
 Or thou'lt have many a bump to comb—
 Thou wretch, would worry the dead in the tomb!

It is clear that this, though representing the more grotesque of Cormac's verses, would not be the metre for his higher flights. It associates with all sorts of inferior versification: and Cormac is so unique that he must not be hampered by associations. And yet the language and manner of his age suit well with those of our Anglian north. Why not the border-ballad?

(No. 23.)

A thief came by and stole my love,
 And I that pour the poet's wine
 —Who else?—should ride with her beside,
 The maiden that is mine.
 It's me she loves of all the world,
 It's me she mourns so far away,
 —That kissed, and kissed her o'er again
 So many a live-long day!

(No. 53).

Shake the rime from the tent, brother,
 The fell's in the firth-veil's fold.
 Hills are hooded in ice, brother,
 And the singer's lying a-cold!
 There's one hight Thunder-wielder
 I would were never so warm;
 But he lies beside his bonny bride,
 And the red gold buckles her arm.

This is nearer the spirit of the Viking age: and yet Johnny Armstrong, with all his bravery and his undoubted kinship to the raiders of the north, was but their poor relation. He never chanted the *dróttkvæði* in king's courts; he might forge a Jeddart-axe, but never inlaid one of those fibulæ we find in Viking tombs. To dress Cormac as a moss-trooper is still travesty.

It was only after such experiments with the greater part of the book that we devised the makeshift we have adopted for the metre of our

translations. It preserves what is all-important, the Celtic triple beat, and the alliteration. The rhyme is let go; a little end-rhyme is sometimes allowed where circumstances warrant it. The trochees, which require iambic brevity, are replaced by anapæsts which allow a little more play to loose conjunctions and prepositions: the line is lengthened without having the number of feet increased. The best that can be said of the metre is, perhaps, that it sounds unfamiliar, and does not force alien associations upon this foreign and old-world verse.

XIV.

The prose is no less old-world, but it is by no means so foreign. It is not, so to say, the same language with the verse. The one is flavoured with Celticism and artificiality; the other is nothing if not Teutonic and natural. It is all in short sentences, without dependent clauses; to get the effects of which, statements are interwoven after a curious manner, as if to prepare the hearer, by 'asides' in parentheses, for the sequel. This is what Gudbrand Vigfússon meant by "sudden transitions and want of connection." In fact, prose, always later in development than verse, had to be invented in Iceland long after the *dróttkvæði* was elaborated.

Now in copying an old picture one may try to restore it,—to make it look as it did to contemporaries when the colours were fresh; or one may take it as we find it now. It is always dangerous to restore. We have not the contemporaries' eyes to see it with, even if we were successful in reproducing the old-fashioned handiwork. So in translating a Saga, we cannot hear it read or said by the ancient Saga-teller, nor put ourselves in the place of his mediæval audience. It is impossible to treat it as a contemporary narration. Part of the charm they found in it is gone; another charm has come to it from its faded age and crusted varnish of antiquity, through which the human nature still shines, attracting us to our kin of long ago.

A modern manner, with long Latin words and the sentences of the ready writer, would be out of keeping with this obviously archaic narrative. We must give something of the antique form. It is not a newspaper obituary. But the opposite danger is that sham antiquarianism they call "Wardour-

street English," from which Saga-translation and viking stories have suffered too often.

There is, however, a sort of English which is neither that of the journalist nor the historical novelist, though plain enough and to many of us familiar; and it perfectly matches this old Norse, being indeed its direct descendant, and surviving among the children of the Vikings in northern England. If the Saga could be turned into the talk of an old-fashioned peasant of Yorkshire or Cumberland it would be precisely represented, even to tricks of phrase and manner, with many an ancient word retained and reproduced.

This we have aimed at, though without spelling as dialect, and without venturing on old words not generally understood of the people. Still, if a north-countryman were to read the book in his broad pronunciation it would run most trippingly.

The Icelandic names, which are made strange to us by their spelling, we have Englished, though not violently. With all the "rough coarse life" of this "rough coarse story" it is curious that we should not have been tempted to extenuate more than one single word,—the name that Steingerd gave to her wounded husband. We resisted the temptation. There is no Bowdlerizing whatever in our translation. But compare a French *fabliau* of contemporary authorship!

XV.

One reason of this moderation of language is that the Saga-teller could not, in the nature of things, be very free in his remarks, because he might be speaking to the descendants of the characters in his story, and they might take it ill. It follows that the tale was told on the most modern principles, without violent contrast of hero and villain.

Of our poet's two rivals, who in turn married the lady he loved, Bersi is treated with consideration as a famous fighting man and himself a Skald, though his verses are rougher than Cormac's. The other, Thorvald the Tinker, is never personally attacked except in Cormac's petulant verse. Not a word conveys reproach to Steingerd; it is only on reflection that we

find her to be shallow and vulgar, and all her life on the downward road. But Cormac loved her, and no friend of his could well attack her. Indeed, many a modern reader will think her in the right all along. So she was, in every little point of petty correctness. But she had neither heart nor soul to know a genius and a hero from the average successful man. Next, she shows herself below normal in deserting her husband on the first turn in the tide of his success. Then she settles down with anybody who will give her a good home, reserving the liberty of flirtation without a spark of love. And in the end, when the truth is forced on her, she creeps behind the egotism of an inferior nature, shielding herself in the assurance that she had been right throughout, and "won't change knives."

Cormac himself is curiously opposite in character. He seems to have fallen in love through pure imagination, and to have idealized the girl he met in such romantic circumstances, just as a boy-poet would; though he persisted in his infatuation with a tenacity unusual in poets, for there is no hint in the story that he consoled himself with a Gemma Donati, or otherwise. He was a heathen and a viking, but we can hardly think over his life without admiration. He was sadly unpractical when his own interests were at stake; dreaming and idling when, as we English would say, he should have been doing: then rushing in furiously and too late; then blaming himself and everybody for the ill luck which the Saga—naturally in that age—explains by witchcraft. But note that the poet was the last to believe in the witchcraft. He believed in gods and in fates, but scorned to buy a *spaewife's* help or to borrow the advantage of the magic sword. He was on a much higher level of intellect than the rest of them, or even than the Saga-teller, the Christian of some centuries later: and his faithfulness and many noble instincts put him on a higher level of morality. With King Harald Greyfell we may be annoyed at his pertinacity, but we feel that the king admired his laureate. With his brother Thorgils we may regret his outbursts of passion and his unreasoning obstinacy, but we see how Thorgils loved him and stood by him.

It is part of the Saga-plot to have among the *dramatis personæ* a conventional Pylades, as in old French drama: but Thorgils plays the part to perfection. Cormac sometimes calls him *Skardi*, "Hare-lip," and perhaps

some such defect made him content to take the second place. But he filled it well, and Cormac's last words left him heir to his leadership and wealth, and "he was long in viking." From other sources we learn that he went back to the old home at Mel, and left behind him two sons, the elder named after his brother and the younger after himself,—Cormac and Thorgils of Mel over again.

XVI.

Of the two antitypes to our hero, Bersi is the most important. His name is like Björn, the Bear, or rather, the familiar form of it, as we say "Bruin." He was called in youth *Eyglu Bersi*, Bruin of *Eygla* or *Ægla*, which is the equivalent of *ógr*, "awe"; meaning the "Awe-striker": and then from his many victories in the judicial combat he was called Holmgang Bersi. This Saga supplies the *locus classicus* for the description of the *holmgang*, about which no more need be said than that it was abolished in Iceland in 1006 A.D., after the great fight at the Althing, between Gunnlaug Ormstunga and his rival Hrafn. It is curious that in this Isle of Robbers, as the rest of the world regarded Iceland, the Right of Might should have been so early abandoned. In Norway the *holmgang* was not abolished until 1012, and in the central countries of Europe it lingered many centuries: indeed the judicial duel may be said to be hardly extinct among some of the most civilized nations at this very day.

Bersi appears in *Landnáma*, which gives an account of his lost Saga, and in the *Laxdala-saga* as we have noted above. We find that he was the son of Gróa, sister of Höskuld, and her husband Véleif; so that he was uncle to Olaf Peacock and great-uncle to Halldór, whom he adopted as a year-old baby.

There is a fund of latent chivalry in Bersi, in spite of overbearing ways. He is the knight-errant of damsels in distress, as Cormac never was: he was a singer too; and his courtesy to the fiery, perverse young opponent in the *holmgang* strikes us with great wonder in that rough age. It is a loss that his own Saga in its entirety has perished; and that he appears in history only as a rival of one more brilliant, but hardly more worthy to be the hero of a tale.

Thorvald *Tintein*, "Tin-twig," which we have called Tinker, is the foil to Bersi as much as to Cormac. "Wealthy, a Smith, and a Skald, but mean-spirited for all that." That such a man should have been Steingerd's final choice reads like a cynical modern novel.

Steinar and the other actors in the play can all be identified in *Landnáma* and the Sagas: they were historical persons, more or less known, and the places where they lived, with some exceptions remarked in our footnotes, are sites of farmsteads to this day.

XVII.

There is a clever touch in the Saga where the old enemy of Cormac's father comes in at the close; the sea-robber who carries off Steingerd and brings about the catastrophe of the love-story is the son of the sea-robber who tries at the outset of the tale to carry off Helga, the bride of Ögmund.

This Asmund Ashenside is a historical character also, as we learn from the independent testimony of *Njáls Saga* (in Dasent's "Story of Burnt Njal," vol. II., p. 2), where his son Kol appears "East out of Smáland" at the Göta Elf, just where Thorstein Asmundarson haunts in our story. And here we may note, in passing, the great distinction between Vikings who raided foreign lands, and those who robbed peaceable travellers or merchants, or plundered and slew on the coasts of their own kith and kin. The first sort were carrying on a form of recognized warfare; the others were downright robbers, and even in that age were regarded as such.

Another name that needs remark is that of Hagbard, whose head was carved on the doorpost at Gnúpsdal where Steingerd stood, in the pretty opening scene of the love-story. The myth of Hagbard is told in Saxo Grammaticus, (book VII.) and in the Danish ballad of Hagbart and Signe, which William Morris has given in "Poems by the Way" under the title of "Hafbur and Signy." No doubt the carving represented the hanging of Hagbard on one side of the door, while Signy was shown burning herself in her "bower of maidens," like Dido, on the other.

The fact of this elaborate sculpture on the door of an upland farm gives us some idea of the architectural pretensions of ancient Icelandic buildings.

Not only Olaf Peacock's Hjardarholt (Herdholt) was so adorned; and the old church-doors still extant show us in what style the decoration was carried out. It does not follow from the silence of the Sagas that these things were not noticed by the ancients. They were not in the dramatic scope of the story: literature did not concern itself with art or landscape nature,—only with human nature. But where touches of description come in, as especially in Cormac's verse, we can tell that he saw and felt the charm of beautiful things.

And indeed he lived in a country where landscape makes a strong appeal: he must have been blind to neglect it; his Irish blood, like Gunnar's, must have given him something of the joy of St. Columba in sea and sky and in mountains and flowers.

We, for his sake, went over the ground he had trod,—the Mel and Reykir of his Midfiord, the shores of Hrútafiord, the wild uplands of the isthmus between Thambardal and Snartartúnga, Steinvör's home, on Bitra, and the great dale of Saurbæ. We saw where Bersi had slain Váli, and in an ancient sunken cairn fancied we might have found the very grave on Válafall. We visited Brekka and the other sites of Saurbæ down the dale from Bersi's home, where his altarstone still stands by the temple-ruins, and the plot of land he dedicated to Thor still remains yearly unmown. We stood on the very Leidhólm where the holmgang was fought, by the branching Midá, and traced the booth of Olaf Peacock with its "outhouse" at Thorsness-thing, as the tide went out in the voe, where Thord searched at low water and found the lucky-stone. All these scenes and sites are yet there, undestroyed, unforgotten; and, wandering among them, we learnt to read the Saga in a new light.



Sunset over Mel and Midfjord.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CORMAC THE SKALD.

CHAPTER I.—CORMAC'S FORE-ELDERS.

HARALD Fairhair was king of Norway when this tale begins. There was a chief in the kingdom in those days and his name was Cormac; one of the Vík-folk* by kindred, a great man and of high birth. He was the mightiest of champions, and had been with King Harald in many battles.

He had a son called Ogmund, a very hopeful lad; big and sturdy even as a child; who when he was grown of age and come to his full strength, took to sea-roving in summer and served in the king's household in winter. So he earned for himself a good name and great riches.

One summer he went roving about the British Isles and there he fell in with a man named Asmund Ashenside, who also was a great champion and had worsted many vikings and men of war. These two heard tell of one another and challenges passed between them. They came together and fought. Asmund had the greater following, but he withheld some of his men from the battle: and so for the length of four days they fought, until many of Asmund's people were fallen, and at last he himself fled. Ogmund won the victory and came home again with wealth and worship.

His father said that he could get no greater glory in war,—
“And now,” said he, “I will find thee a wife. What sayest thou to Helga, the daughter of Earl Fródi?”

“So be it,” said Ogmund.

* Inhabitants of the Bight (Vikin) in the South of Norway.



The River of Midfiord; Eiríksjökul in the distance and the hills of Grúpsdal to the right.

ON THE HOMES OF CORMAC AND STEINGERD.

Midfiord, although a fine mountain loch, is not one of the grandest of the fiords; and the country in which Cormac, the most romantic of skalds, grew up to be a poet, is not the most romantic part of Iceland. But it has what to a young imagination is better than the near presence of magnificent scenery. It has the sea coming up from the broad bight of Húnaflói, and the river coming down through long valleys from the distant mountains. Close to Melstadr the stream sweeps through a wide and winding bed which it has cut for itself between high banks of ancient glacial moraine,—the Meols or Sandhills. The shoals of pebble and gravel are thickly bestrewn with blocks and boulders, among which many wandering watercourses foam or pause in continual change of mood. The steep banks support a rich spread of grass lands, falling gently towards the river from upper moors and rugged hills which rise behind them on either side, reaching far back towards the higher tops of the mountains, flecked even in summer with snow.

The homestead of Mel is set on a gentle height among green fields, overlooking the valley and fiord with a noble prospect on every hand. Close by, across the river, is Reykir, the home of Skeggi ("Beardie") of Midfiord: and farther up the valley on the same side is Bjarg, the home of Grettir the Strong.

From Mel to the northward, out and beyond the narrow fiord, are long lines of huge cliffs, broken with dark ravines and capped with snow, across the sea and far away. All down the western side the mountain-line continues, ending in the white peaks of Tröllakirkja (the Fiends' Kirk) and the flat horizon of the upland moors, over which the clear white dome of Eiríks-jökul rises, about forty miles distant, enormous, and backed with the long curves of the snows and glaciers that crown the mountains of the interior. So that if immediate picturesqueness is wanting in some degree, there is the far-off beckoning of mountain glory, whichever way you turn.

Knipedale (to use the North-English equivalent for Gnúpsdal) to which the scene changes in the next chapter, is the middle fork of three into which the main valley of Midfiord divides, as you go up towards the great waste of the Two-days'-heath where the famous battle of the Heath-slayings took

place at a later period. Tongue (Túnga) is the promontory of land which parts Knipedale from the next valley,—we have a “Tongue” in Troutbeck near Windermere, between the two forks of the dale: and in old times such a situation was liked for its commanding outlook and firm soil,—the undrained valley-bottom being marshy,—and for its freedom from landslip and avalanche. It is a green valley, somewhat like one of the wilder Westmorland dales; not at all Alpine in character; good sheep-farming land, to which—as Furness sheep used to be sent up to the Wythburn fells—the sheep of Mel were sent for summer pasture, and gathered again in the autumn.

For Vatznes (or Vatns-nes, *i.e.* Waterness) in Midfjord we find a Cumberland parallel in Watsness, the name of a little promontory in Devokewater: and the English Stonestead would represent the Icelandic Steinsstadir, a site now deserted, though Mel and the other ancient homes are inhabited to this day.

CHAPTER III.—HOW CORMAC FELL IN LOVE.

THERE was a man named Thorkel lived at Túnga (Tongue). He was a wedded man, and had a daughter called Steingerd who was fostered in Gnúpsdal (Knipedale).

Now it was one autumn that a whale came ashore at Vatnsnes (Watsness), and it belonged to the brothers, Dalla's sons. Thorgils asked Cormac would he rather go shepherding on the fell, or work at the whale. He chose to fare on the fell with the house-carles.

Tósti, the foreman, it was should be master of the sheep-gathering: so he and Cormac went together until they came to Gnúpsdal. It was night: there was a great hall, and fires for men to sit at.

That evening Steingerd came out of her bower, and a maid with her. Said the maid, "Steingerd mine, let us look at the guests."

"Nay," she said, "no need": and yet went to the door, and stepped on the threshold, and spied across the gate. Now there was a space between the wicket and the threshold, and her feet showed through. Cormac saw that, and made this song:—

(1).

"At the door of my soul she is standing,
So sweet in the gleam of her garment:
Her footfall awakens a fury,
A fierceness of love that I knew not,
Those feet of a wench in her wimple,
Their weird is my sorrow and troubling,
—Or naught may my knowledge avail me—
Both now and for aye to endure."

Then Steingerd knew she was seen. She turned aside into a corner where the likeness of Hagbard* was carved on the wall, and

*Hagbard, a famous early mythical king. In the *Völsunga Saga* (chapter 25) Brynhild names him with the sons of Haki as the first of men before the time of Sigurd the dragon-slayer.

peeped under Hagbard's beard. Then the firelight shone upon her face.

"Cormac," said Tósti, "seest eyes out yonder by that head of Hagbard?"

Cormac answered in song :—

(2)

"There breaks on me, burning upon me,
A blaze from the cheeks of a maiden,
—I laugh not to look on the vision—
In the light of the hall by the doorway.
So sweet and so slender I deem her,
Though I spy but a glimpse of an ankle
By the threshold :—and through me there flashes
A thrill that shall age never more."

And then he made another song :—

(3)

"The moon of her brow, it is beaming
'Neath the bright-litten heaven of her forehead :
So she gleams in her white robe, and gazes
With a glance that is keen as the falcon's.
But the star that is shining upon me
What spell shall it work by its witchcraft?
Ah, that moon of her brow shall be mighty
With mischief to her—and to me!"

Said Tósti, "She is fairly staring at thee!"—And he answered :—

(4)

"She's a ring-bedight oak of the ale-cup,
And her eyes never left me unhaunted.
The strife in my heart I could hide not,
For I hold myself bound in her bondage."

O gay in her necklet, and gainer
 In the game that wins hearts on her chessboard,—
 When she looked at me long from the doorway
 Where the likeness of Hagbard is carved.”

Then the girls went into the hall, and sat down. He heard what they said about his looks,—the maid, that he was black and ugly, and Steingerd, that he was handsome and everyway as best could be,—“There is only one blemish,” said she, “his hair is tufted on his forehead:”—and he said:—

(5)

“One flaw in my features she noted
 —With the flame of the wave* she was gleaming
 All white in the wane of the twilight—
 And that one was no hideous blemish.
 So highborn, so haughty a lady
 —I should have such a dame to befriend me:
 But she throws me uncouth for a trifle,
 For a tuft in the hair on my brow!”

Said the maid, “Black are his eyes, sister, and that becomes him not.” Cormac heard her, and said in verse:—

(6)

“Yea, black are the eyes that I bring ye,
 O brave in your jewels, and dainty.
 But a draggle-tail, dirty-foot slattern
 Would dub me ill-favoured and sallow.
 Nay, many a maiden has loved me,
 Thou may of the glittering armlet:
 For I’ve tricks of the tongue to beguile them
 And turn them from handsomer lads.”

* The flame of the wave, the fire of the sea, and so forth are commonly used in these verses for gold.

At this house they spent the night. In the morning when Cormac rose up, he went to a trough and washed himself; then he went into the ladies' bower and saw nobody there, but heard folk talking in the inner room, and he turned and entered. There was Steingerd, and women with her.

Said the maid to Steingerd, "There comes thy bonny man, Steingerd."

"Well, and a fine-looking lad he is," said she.

Now she was combing her hair, and Cormac asked her, "Wilt thou give me leave?"

She reached out her comb for him to handle it. She had the finest hair of any woman. Said the maid, "Ye would give a deal for a wife with hair like Steingerd's, or such eyes!"

He answered:—

(7)

"One eye of the fay of the ale-horn*
Looking out of a form so bewitching,
Would a bridegroom count money to buy it
He must bring for it ransom three hundred.†
The curls that she combs of a morning,
White-clothed in fair linen and spotless,
They enhance the bright hoard of her value,—
Five hundred might barely redeem them!"

Said the maid, "It's give and take with the two of ye! But thou'lt put a big price upon the whole of her!" He answered:—

(8)

"The tree of my treasure and longing,
It would take this whole Iceland to win her:

* The goddess or nymph of the ale is often used in verses for a lady: who then, as now "poured out" for the men.

† A hundred ells of cloth (vadmal) was the standard of value,—worth one good milch cow.

She is dearer than far-away Denmark,
 And the doughty domain of the Hun-folk.
 With the gold she is combing, I count her
 More costly than England could ransom :
 So witty, so wealthy, my lady
 Is worth them,—and Ireland beside !”

Then Tósti came in, and called Cormac out to some work or other ; but he said :—

(9)

“Take my swift-footed steed for thy riding,
 Ay, and stint not the lash to him, Tósti :
 On the desolate downs ye may wander
 And drive him along till he weary.
 I care not o’er mountain and moorland
 The murrey-brown weathers to follow,—
 Far liefer I’d linger the morning
 In long, cosy chatter with Steingerd.”

Tósti said he would find it a merrier game, and went off ; so Cormac sat down to chess, and right gay he was. Steingerd said he talked better than folk told of ; and he sat there all the day ; and then he made this song :—

(10)

“’Tis the dart that adorneth her tresses,
 The deep, dewy grass of her forehead.
 So kind to my keeping she gave it,
 That good comb I shall ever remember !
 A stranger was I when I sought her
 —Sweet stem with the dragon’s hoard shining—*
 With gold like the sea-dazzle gleaming—
 The girl I shall never forget.”

* A tree decked with gold, the treasure of the dragon Fafnir, is a frequent metaphor for a lady : as “tree of weapons,” etc., for a warrior. Our Christmas tree is a recurrence to old Northern habits of adorning sacred trees.

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Tósti came off the fell and they fared home. After that Cormac used to go to Gnúpsdal often to see Steingerd: and he asked his mother to make him good clothes, so that Steingerd might like him the most that could be. Dalla said there was a mighty great difference betwixt them, and it was far from certain to end happily if Thorkel at Túnga got to know.

CHAPTER IV.—HOW CORMAC LIKED BLACK-PUDDINGS.

WELL, Thorkel soon heard what was going forward, and thought it would turn out to his own shame and his daughter's if Cormac would not pledge himself to take her or leave her. So he sent for Steingerd, and she went home.

Thorkel had a man called Narfi,* a noisy, foolish fellow, boastful, and yet of little account. Said he to Thorkel, "If Cormac's coming likes thee not, I can soon settle it."

"Very well," says Thorkel.

Now, in the autumn, Narfi's work it was to slaughter the sheep.† Once, when Cormac came to Túnga, he saw Steingerd in the kitchen. Narfi stood by the kettle, and when they had finished the boiling, he took up a black-pudding and thrust it under Cormac's nose, crying :—

(11)

"Cormac, how would ye relish one?
Kettle-worms I call them."

To which he answered :—

(12)

"Black-puddings boiled, quoth Ogmund's son,
Are a dainty,—fair befall them!"||

And in the evening when Cormac made ready to go home he saw Narfi, and bethought him of those churlish words. "I think, Narfi," said he, "I am more like to knock thee down, than thou to rule my coming and going." And with that struck him an axe-hammer-blow, saying :—

* A Narfi, very like this man, appears in the story of Grettir the Strong as one of Cormac's kinsmen. The name however is not rare.

† The sheep which were fattened on the rich hill-pastures during summer, were killed in autumn, and hung in smoke or pickled in sour whey : as indeed is still done in Iceland.

|| Anticipating Burns !—"Fair fa' your honest sonsy face !"

(13)

“Why foul with thy clowning and folly,
The food that is dressed for thy betters?
Thou blundering archer, what ails thee
To be aiming thy insults at me?”

And he made another song about it:—

(14)

“He asked me, the clavering cowerd
If I cared for—what was it he called them?—
The worms of the kettle. I warrant
He’ll be wiping his eyes by the hearth-stone.
I deem that yon knave of the dunghill
Who dabbles the muck on the meadow
—Yon rook in his mud-spattered raiment—
Got a rap for his noise—like a dog.”

CHAPTER V.—THEY WAYLAY CORMAC: AND THE WITCH CURSES HIM.

THERE was a woman named Thorveig, and she knew a deal too much.* She lived at Steins-stadir (Stonestead) in Midfjord, and had two sons; the elder was Odd, and the younger Gudmund. They were great braggarts both of them.

This Odd often came to see Thorkel at Túnga, and used to sit and talk with Steingerd. Thorkel made a great show of friendship with the brothers, and egged them on to waylay Cormac. Odd said it was no more than he could do.

So one day when Cormac came to Túnga, Steingerd was in the parlour and sat on the daïs. Thorveig's sons sat in the room, ready to fall upon him when he came in; and Thorkel had put a drawn sword on one side of the door, and on the other side Narfi had put a scythe in its shaft. When Cormac came to the hall-door the scythe fell down and met the sword, and broke a great notch in it. Out came Thorkel and began to upbraid Cormac for a rascal, and got fairly wild with his talk: then flung into the parlour and bade Steingerd out of it. Forth they went by another door, and he locked her into an outhouse, saying that Cormac and she should never meet again.

Cormac went in: and he came quicker than folk thought for, and they were taken aback. He looked about, and no Steingerd: but he saw the brothers whetting their weapons: so he turned on his heel and went, saying:—

(14)

“The weapon that mows in the meadow
It met with the gay painted buckler,†

* Was a witch.

† So the song says, although the tale makes mention only of a sword that clashed with the scythe. In several instances the songs appear to preserve incidents which the story has forgotten.



Mel and Midford.

When I came to encounter a goddess
Who carries the beaker of wine.
Beware! for I warn you of evil
When warriors threaten me mischief.
It shall not be for nought that I pour ye
The newly mixed mead of the gods.*

And when he could find Steingerd nowhere, he made this song :—

(16)

“She has gone, with the glitter of ocean
Agleam on her wrist and her bosom;
And my heart follows hard on her footsteps,
For the hall is in darkness without her.
I have gazed, but my glances can pierce not
The gloom of the desolate dwelling;
And fierce is my longing to find her,
The fair one who only can heal me.”

After a while he came to the outhouse where Steingerd was, and burst it open and had talk with her.

“This is madness,” cried she, “to come talking with me; for Thorveig’s sons are meant to have thy head.”

But he answered :—

(17)

“There wait they within that would snare me;
There whet they their swords for my slaying.
My bane they shall be not, the cowards,
The brood of the churl and the carline.
Let the twain of them find me and fight me
In the field, without shelter to shield them,
And ewes of the sheep should be surer
To shorten the days of the wolf.”

* The intoxicating, inspiring drink of Odin,—poetry.

So he sat there all day. By that time Thorkel saw that the plan he had made was come to nothing; and he bade the sons of Thorveig waylay Cormac in a dale near his garth. "Narfi shall go with ye two," said he; "but I will stay at home, and bring you help if need be."

In the evening Cormac set out, and when he came to the dale, he saw three men, and said in verse:—

(18)

"There sit they in hiding to stay me
From the sight of my queen of the jewels: *
But rude will their task be to reave me
From the roof of my bounteous lady.
The fainer the hatred they harbour
For him that is free of her doorway,
The fainer my love and my longing
For the lass that is sweeter than samphire." †

Then leaped up Thorveig's sons, and fought Cormac for a time: Narfi the while skulked and dodged behind them. Thorkel saw from his house that they were getting but slowly forward, and he took his weapons. In that nick of time Steingerd came out and saw what her father meant. She laid hold on his hands, and he got no nearer to help the brothers. In the end Odd fell, and Gudmund was so wounded that he died afterwards. Thorkel saw to them, and Cormac went home.

A little after this Cormac went to Thorveig and said he would have her no longer live there at the firch. "Thou shalt flit and go thy way at such a time," said he, "and I will give no blood-money for thy sons."

* "Stone-goddess," a play upon the name of Steingerd.

† Used in those days as food (*Crithmum maritimum*).

Thorveig answered, "It is like enough ye can hunt me out of the countryside, and leave my sons unatoned. But this way I'll reward thee. Never shalt thou have Steingerd."

Said Cormac, "That's not for thee to make or to mar, thou wicked old hag!"

CHAPTER VI.—CORMAC WINS HIS BRIDE AND LOSES HER.

AFTER this, Cormac went to see Steingerd the same as ever : and once when they talked over these doings she said no ill of them : whereupon he made this song :—

(19)

“There sat they in hiding to stay me
From the sight of my bride and my darling :
But weak were the feet of my foemen
When we fought on the island of weapons.
And the rush of the mightiest rivers
Shall race from the shore to the mountains
Or ever I leave thee, my lady,
And the love that I feast on to-day !”

“Say no such big words about it,” answered she ; “Many a thing may stand in the road.”

Upon which he said :—

(20)

“O sweet in the sheen of thy raiment,
The sight of thy beauty is gladdening !
What man that goes marching to battle,
What mate wouldst thou choose to be thine ?”

And she answered :—

(21)

“O giver of gold, O ring-breaker,
If the gods and the high fates befriend me,
I'd pledge me to Fródi's blithe brother*
And bind him that he should be mine.”

Then she told him to make friends with her father and get her in marriage. So for her sake Cormac gave Thorkel good gifts. Afterwards many people had their say in the matter ; but in the end

* The first son of Cormac's father was Fródi, who died young : see chapter II.

it came to this,—that he asked for her, and she was pledged to him, and the wedding was fixed ; and so all was quiet for a while.

Then they had words. There was some falling-out about settlements. It came to such a pass that after everything was ready, Cormac began to cool off. But the real reason was, that Thorveig had bewitched him so that they should never have one another.

Thorkel at Túnga had a grown-up son, called Thorkel and by-named Tooth-gnasher.* He had been abroad some time, but this summer he came home and stayed with his father.

Cormac never came to the wedding at the time it was fixed, and the hour passed by. This the kinsfolk of Steingerd thought a slight, deeming that he had broken off the match ; and they had much talk about it.

* After the name of Thor's goat in Edda mythology.



Gullfoss.

ON HRUTAFIORD AND SAURBÆ.

A new part of the story now begins, introducing Bersi, the successful rival of Cormac, and shifting the scene westward from Midfiord to Hrútafiord and Saurbæ.

It is a ride of about six miles from Melstadr, across a rough, hummocky moor, the "hause" (háls) to the nearest point on Hrútafiord (by some saga-translators Englished as "Ramfirth"), which is a narrow loch, lying north and south, nearly parallel with Midfiord, but more than twice as long. On its eastern shore, and just over the hause from Melstadr, is a farm called Bessastadir (Bersi's stead), which may be the farm given by Bersi to Thorveig the witch (chap. vii.). To reach Bersi's home in Saurbæ (Sourby) the shortest way is to cross the water in a boat and save a weary ride round the head of the firth, and then from the western shore it is only fifteen miles as the crow flies to Bessatunga (Bersi's Tongue). But between these two points a great range of mountains intervenes, the backbone of the west of Iceland; not a volcanic group of cones; but a regular mountain range of continuous trap rock, level-bedded, scarred on its flanks into deep gorges and dark valleys, and rising here and there into peaks, though in its main mass an unbroken plateau without cross-clefts or passes. The ordinary "post road," if such a term can be used of a mountain-track along which the letter-carrier rides at intervals, is probably identical with the route of the travellers in the saga; for although there are other tracks across the ridge, none is easier nor practically shorter.

This road leads from the western shore of Hrútafiord nearly to the great headland which forms, so to say, the gateway of the loch, passing through the delightfully picturesque scenery of the waterside with its varied and castle-like crags, and cottages nestling under them among green fields, and then crosses an easy pass to Bitra, a little fiord which comes into our story later on. Going up Bitra we have Thambardal (chap. xv.) on the left hand, and Ospaks-eyri, the site of the robber's castle taken by Snorri the Priest (see *Eyrbyggja*, towards the end); and at the head of the fiord is Snartartunga (the Tongue), at which lived Odd the fisher and his daughter Steinvör (chap. xv.), a Wastdale-like valley, with sweeping lines of mountain-skirts falling into the flat pasture lands of the valley-bottom. Hence the

path goes up a steep glen higher and higher until you get out and upon the summit of the main mass, on a wild upland among tumbled rocks and snow-drifts and roaring torrents, which show how big and broad the chain must be that carries such rivers on its back, where you would expect only trickling streams of the watershed.

After long riding you come to the brink of a precipice, and, looking down, see a great valley up which comes the sea of the west, penetrating far inland by narrow Gilsfiord. Far beneath your feet is the tiny homestead of Kleifar (the cliffs, like "Claife," at Windermere), and close above it the valley is walled across by these same cliffs, down which the Gullfoss (Gold force) pours in one jet of foam and roars through its ravine below. You wonder how the descent is to be made; but, step by step, from ledge to ledge, the ponies clamber downwards, the heights you have left tower aloft, Gullfoss itself, which at first seemed a splash of white on the blackness of its rock-wall, at last amplifies into a noble column of roaring spray, and the pretty homestead receives you with Icelandic welcome.

From this point it is a pleasant ride along the picturesque shore of Gilsfiord, past Olafsdal, an ancient settlement, and now a large training school for farmers, among well-kept meadows. You skirt the loch—always under mountain crags—until to the left-hand the main valley of Saurbæ opens up, retreating far back into the hills.

The land is more open here, "between firth and fell." The soil is boulder-clay, whence the name of the district—Saurbæ (the "muddy farm"), identical with our Sowerby and Sorby. At the mouth of this valley you come to Hvol (the little hill, like the Westmorland "Whale"), which, as it lies nearest to Hrútafiord, may be the Váli's stead of our next chapter. In a similar position, across the river, is Nedrimúli, perhaps the Múli (compare the "Mull" of Cantire) of Thórd in chap. vii. Further out, towards the sea, is the rising headland of Tjaldanes (Tilt-ness, the promontory of tents), and beneath it Orrustuhólm (the isle of battle, compare Orrest, near Windermere), where Bersi fought one of his duels (chap. xiv.), and where, perhaps, his kinsman, Vigi the warlock, lived (chap. vii.).

Going up the valley from Hvol, you cross the river to Hvítadal, where Kjartan called on his last ride, as told in *Laxdæla*, and thence the path

leads to the head of the valley and over the pass to Svínadal and the South by the branch of the stream that comes from the right-hand. Between this and the main branch a tongue of land stands boldly out, almost filling the already narrowed glen, and rising behind into lofty crags. Nowhere have we seen crags so dark, so impressive in their enormous height and mass, in sheer fall from snow-streaked sky-line to green dale-bottom. This tongue of land with its homestead and garth, with the site of Bersi's temple and his altar-stone still visible—where the plot he consecrated to the gods is yet every year unmown—this is Bessatúnga (Bersi's Tongue) to which he brought home his bride on the wedding journey now to be related.



Bersi's Home at Bessatunga.

CHAPTER VII.—HOW STEINGERD WAS MARRIED TO SOMEBODY ELSE.

BERSI lived in the land of Saurbæ, a rich man and a good fellow : he was well to the fore, a fighter, and a champion at the holmgang.* He had been married to Finna the Fair : but she was dead : Asmund was their son, young in years but early ripe. Helga was the sister of Bersi : she was unmarried, but a fine woman and a pushing one, and she kept house for Bersi after Finna died.

At the farm called Múli (the Mull) lived Thórd Arndísarson : he was wedded to Thórdís, sister of Börk the Stout.† They had two sons who were both younger than Asmund the son of Bersi.

There was also a man called Váli. His farm was named Váli's stead, and it stood on the way to Hrútafiord.

Now Thorveig the spaewife went to see Holmgang Bersi and told him her trouble. She said that Cormac forbade her staying in Midfiord : so Bersi bought land for her west of the firth, and she lived there for a long time afterwards.‡

Once when Thorkel at Túnga and his son were talking about Cormac's breach of faith and deemed that it should be avenged, Narfi said, "I see a plan that will do. Let us go to the west-country with plenty of goods and gear, and come to Bersi in Saurbæ. He is wifeless. Let us entangle him in the matter. He would be a great help to us."

That counsel they took. They journeyed to Saurbæ, and Bersi welcomed them. In the evening they talked of nothing but weddings. Narfi up and said there was no match so good as Steingerd,—“And a deal of folk say, Bersi, that she would suit thee.”

* See chap. x for the account of the holmgang.

† The famous Börk of Gislí's Saga, etc., so that Thórd was connected with the great family of Helgafell.

‡ Perhaps at Bessastadir on the east bank of Hrútafiord.

"I have heard tell," he answered, "that there will be a rift in the road,* though the match is a good one."

"If it's Cormac men fear," cried Narfi, "there is no need; for he is clean out of the way."

When Bersi heard that, he opened the matter to Thorkel Toothgnasher, and asked for Steingerd. Thorkel made a good answer, and pledged his sister to him.

So they rode north, eighteen in all, for the wedding. There was a man named Vígi lived at Holm, a big man and strong of his hands, a warlock, and Bersi's kinsman. He went with them, and they thought he would be a good helper. Thórd Arndísarson too went north with Bersi, and many others, all picked men.

When they came to Thorkel's, they set about the wedding at once, so that no news of it might get out through the countryside: but all this was sore against Steingerd's will.

Now Vígi the warlock knew every man's affairs who came to the steading or left it. He sat outmost in the chamber, and slept by the hall door.

Steingerd sent for Narfi, and when they met she said,—“I wish thee, kinsman, to tell Cormac the business they are about: I wish thee to take this message to him.”

So he set out secretly; but when he was gone a little way Vígi came after, and bade him creep home and hatch no plots. They went back together, and so the night passed.

Next morning Narfi started forth again; but before he had gone so far as on the evening, Vígi beset him, and drove him back without mercy.

*In a lava-country, as Iceland is in parts, a "cross-crack" is no uncommon hindrance to wayfarers.

When the wedding was ended they made ready for their journey. Steingerd took her gold and jewels, and they rode towards Hrutafiord, going rather slowly. When they were off, Narfi set out and came to Mel. Cormac was building a wall, and hammering it with a mallet. Narfi rode up, with his shield and sword, and carried on strangely, rolling his eyes about like a hunted beast. Some men were up on the wall with Cormac when he came, and his horse shied at them. Said Cormac,—“What news, Narfi? What folk were with you last night?”

“Small tidings, but we had guests enough,” answered he.

“Who were the guests?”

“There was Holmgang Bersi, with seventeen more to sit at his wedding.”

“Who was the bride?”

“Bersi wed Steingerd Thorkel’s daughter,” said Narfi. “When they were gone she sent me here to tell thee the news.”

“Thou hast never a word but ill,” said Cormac, and leapt upon him and struck at the shield: and as it slipped aside he was smitten on the breast and fell from his horse; and the horse ran away with the shield (hanging to it).

Cormac’s brother Thorgils said this was too much. “It serves him right,” cried Cormac. And when Narfi woke out of his swoon they got speech of him.

Thorgils asked, “What manner of men were at the wedding?”

Narfi told him.

“Did Steingerd know this before?”

“Not till the very evening they came,” answered he; and then told of his dealings with Vígi, saying that Cormac would find it

56 THE LIFE AND DEATH OF CORMAC THE SKALD.

easier to whistle on Steingerd's tracks and go on a fool's errand than to fight Bersi. Then said Cormac :—

(22)

“Now see to thy safety henceforward,
And stick to thy horse and thy buckler;
Or this mallet of mine, I can tell thee,
Will meet with thine ear of a surety.
Now say no more stories of feasting,
Though seven in a day thou couldst tell of,
Or bumps thou shalt comb on thy brainpan,
Thou that breakest the howes of the dead.”*

Thorgils asked about the settlements between Bersi and Steingerd. Her kinsmen, said Narfi, were now quit of all farther trouble about that business, however it might turn out; but her father and brother would be answerable for the wedding.

*As much as to say “Brute that wouldst worry the dead” by raking up by-gones.

CHAPTER VIII.—HOW CORMAC CHASED BERSI AND HIS BRIDE.

CORMAC took his horse and weapons and saddle-gear.
“What now, brother?” asked Thorgils.

He answered :—

(23)

“My bride, my betrothed has been stolen,
And Bersi the raider has robbed me.
I who offer the song-cup of Odin—
Who else?—should be riding beside her.
She loved me—no lord of them better :
I have lost her—for me she is weeping :
The dear, dainty darling that kissed me,
For day upon day of delight.”

Said Thorgils, “A risky errand is this, for Bersi will get home before you catch him. And yet I will go with thee.”

Cormac said he would away and bide for no man. He leapt on his horse forthwith, and galloped as hard as he could. Thorgils made haste to gather men,—they were eighteen in all,—and came up with Cormac on the hause that leads to Hrútafiord, for he had foundered his horse. So they turned to Thorveig the spaewife’s farmsteading, and found that Bersi was gone aboard her boat.

She had said to Bersi, “I wish thee to take a little gift from me, and good luck follow it.”

This was a target bound with iron ; and she said she reckoned Bersi would hardly be hurt if he carried it to shield him,—“but it is little worth beside this steading thou hast given me.” He thanked her for the gift, and so they parted. Then she got men to scuttle all the boats on the shore, because she knew beforehand that Cormac and his folk were coming.

When they came and asked her for a boat, she said she would



Borðeyri on Hrítafjörður.

do them no kindness without payment ;—"Here is a rotten boat in the boathouse which I would lend for half a mark."*

Thorgils said it would be in reason if she asked two ounces of silver. Such matters, said Cormac, should not stand in the way ; but Thorgils said he would sooner ride all round the water-head. Nevertheless Cormac had his will, and they started in the boat ; but they had scarcely put off from shore when it filled, and they had hard work to get back to the same spot.

"Thou shouldst pay dearly for this, thou wicked old hag," said Cormac, "and never be paid at all."

That was no mighty trick to play them, she said ; and so Thorgils paid her the silver ; about which Cormac made this song :—

(24)

"I'm a tree that is tricked out in war-gear,
She, the trim rosy elf of the shuttle :
And I break into singing about her
Like the bat at the well, never ceasing.†
With the dew-drops of Draupnir the golden‡
Full dearly folk buy them their blessings,
Then lay down three ounces and leave them
For the leaky old boat that we borrowed."

Bersi got hastily to horse, and rode homewards ; and when Cormac saw that he must be left behind, he made this song :—

(25)

"I tell you, the goddess who glitters
With gold on the perch of the falcon,§

* A mark was eight ounces of silver.

† The washerwomen's bat to beat linen at the spring.

‡ Draupnir was the mythic ring that begot gold.

§ The hawk's perch is often used for the hand or wrist.

The bride that I trusted, my beauty,
 From the bield of my hand has **been taken**.
 On the boat she makes glad in its gliding
 She is gone from me, reft from **me, ravished!**
 O shame, that we linger to save her,
 Too sweet for the prey of the raven!"*

They took their horses and rode round the head of the firth. They met Váli and asked about Bersi; he said that Bersi had come to Múli and gathered men to him,—“A many men.”

“Then we are too late,” said Cormac, “if they have got men together.”

Thorgils begged Cormac to let them turn back, saying there was little honour to be got; but Cormac said he must see Steingerd.

So Váli went with them and they came to Múli where Bersi was and many men with him. They spoke together. Cormac said that Bersi had betrayed him in carrying off Steingerd,—“But now we would take the lady with us, and make him amends for his honour.”

To this said Thórd Arndísarson, “We will offer terms to Cormac, but the lady is in Bersi’s hands.”

“There is no hope that Steingerd will go with you,” said Bersi; “but I offer my sister to Cormac in marriage, and I reckon he will be well wedded if he take Helga.”

“This is a good offer,” said Thorgils; “let us think of it, brother.”

But Cormac started back like a restive horse.

* The raven, meaning Bersi, the robber.

CHAPTER IX.—OF ANOTHER WITCH, AND TWO MAGIC SWORDS.

THERE was a woman called Thórdís—and a shrew she was—who lived at Spákonufell (Spaequean's-fell), in Skagastrand.*

She, having foresight of Cormac's goings, came that very day to Múli, and answered this matter on his behalf, saying, "Never give him yon false woman. She is a fool, and not fit for any pretty man. Woe will his mother be at such a fate for her lad!"

"Aroint thee, foul witch!" cried Thórd. They should see, said he, that Helga would turn out fine. But Cormac answered, "Said it may be, for sooth it may be: I will never think of her."

"Woe to us, then," said Thorgils, "for listening to the words of yon fiend, and slighting this offer!"

Then spoke Cormac, "I bid thee, Bersi, to the holmgang within half a month, at Leidhólm, in Middal."†

Bersi said he would come, but Cormac should be the worse for his choice.

After this Cormac went about the steading to look for Steingerd. When he found her he said she had betrayed him in marrying another man.

"It was thou that made the first breach, Cormac," said she, "for this was none of my doing."

Then said he in verse:—

(26)

"Thou sayest my faith has been forfeit,
O fair in thy glittering raiment;

* Spákonufell is on the sea coast, a long way north of Melstadr, beyond Midfjord: a low conical hill, one of the outliers of the range which forms the great promontory between Skaga-fjord and Húnaflói; under which is the homestead, and a good harbour formed by a rocky peninsula at which is now a trading place where the steamers stop; still named from this Thórdís.

† "It is now called Orrest-holm," says the saga, *i.e.*, the battle-ground. Nowadays it is called Leidarholm, described in the note after chap. x.



Saurbae from Bessatunga.

But I wearied my steed and outwore it,
 And for what but the love that I bare thee?
 O fainer by far was I, lady,
 To founder my horse in the hunting—
 Nay, I spared not the jade when I spurred it—
 Than to see thee the bride of my foe.”

After this Cormac and his men went home. When he told his mother how things had gone, “Little good,” she said, “will thy luck do us. Ye have slighted a fine offer, and you have no chance against Bersi, for he is a great fighter and he has good weapons.”

Now, Bersi owned the sword they call Whitting; a sharp sword it was, with a life-stone to it; * and that sword he had carried in many a fray.

“Whether wilt thou have weapons to meet Whitting?” she asked. Cormac said he would have an axe both great and keen.

Dalla said he should see Skeggi of Midfjord and ask for the loan of his sword, Sköfnung. So Cormac went to Reykir and told Skeggi how matters stood, asking him to lend Sköfnung. Skeggi said he had no mind to lend it. Sköfnung and Cormac, said he, would never agree: “It is cold and slow, and thou art hot and hasty.”

Cormac rode away and liked it ill. He came home to Mel and told his mother that Skeggi would not lend the sword. Now Skeggi had the oversight of Dalla's affairs, and they were great friends; so she said, “He will lend the sword, though not all at once.”

That was not what he wanted, answered Cormac,—“If he withhold it not from thee, while he does withhold it from me.” Upon which she answered that he was a thwart lad.

A few days afterwards Dalla told him to go to Reykir. “He will lend thee the sword now,” said she. So he sought Skeggi and asked for Sköfnung.

* A precious stone set in the hilt, which would heal the wounds given by the blade,

"Hard wilt thou find it to handle," said Skeggi. "There is a pouch to it, and that thou shalt let be. Sun must not shine on the pommel of the hilt. Thou shalt not wear it until fighting is forward, and when ye come to the field, sit all alone and then draw it. Hold the edge toward thee, and blow on it. Then will a little worm creep from under the hilt. Then slope thou the sword over, and make it easy for that worm to creep back beneath the hilt." *

"Here's a tale of tricks, thou warlock!" cried Cormac.

"Nevertheless," answered Skeggi, "it will stand thee in good stead to know them."

So Cormac rode home and told his mother, saying that her will was of great avail with Skeggi. He showed the sword, and tried to draw it, but it would not leave the sheath.

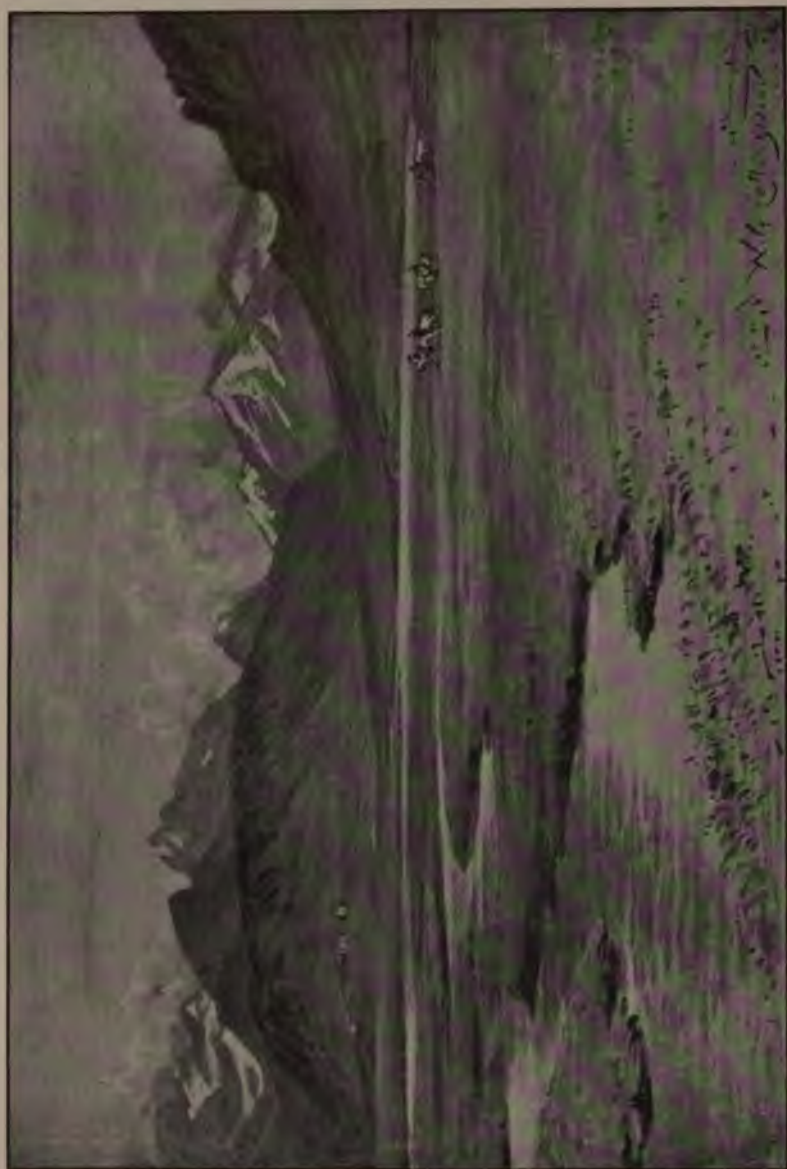
"Thou art over wilful, my son," said she.

Then he set his feet against the hilts, and pulled until he tore the pouch off, at which Sköfnung creaked and groaned, but never came out of the scabbard.

Well, the time wore on, and the day came. He rode away with fifteen men; Bersi also rode to the holm with as many. Cormac came there first, and told Thorgils that he would sit apart by himself. So he sat down and ungirt the sword.

Now, he never heeded whether the sun shone upon the hilt, for he had girt the sword on him outside his clothes. And when he tried to draw it he could not, until he set his feet upon the hilts. Then the little worm came, and was not rightly done by; and so the sword came groaning and creaking out of the scabbard, and the good luck of it was gone.

* By this "little worm" we understand the wavy line of condensed vapour from the breath in blowing on the cold steel. By its advance and retreat would be shown whether the blade kept its temper, Skeggi thought—not without some mysticism in his regard for the magic sword.



Leidholm.

should go to the pins in such a manner that he could see sky between his legs, holding the lobes of his ears and speaking the forewords used in the rite called "The Sacrifice of the *ljösnur*." Three squares should be marked round the hide, each one foot broad. At the outermost corners of the squares should be four poles, called hazels; when this is done, it is a hazelled field. Each man should have three shields,* and when they were cut up he must get upon the hide if he had given way from it before, and guard himself with his weapons alone thereafter. He who had been challenged should strike the first stroke. If one was wounded so that blood fell upon the hide, he should fight no longer. If either set one foot outside the hazel poles "he went on his heel," they said; but he "ran" if both feet were outside. His own man was to hold the shield before each of the fighters. The one who was wounded should pay three marks of silver to be set free.

So the hide was taken and spread under their feet. Thorgils held his brother's shield, and Thórd Arndísarson that of Bersi. Bersi struck the first blow, and cleft Cormac's shield; Cormac struck at Bersi to the like peril. Each of them cut up and spoilt three shields of the other's. Then it was Cormac's turn. He struck at Bersi, who parried with Whitting. Sköfnung cut the point off Whitting in front of the ridge.† The sword-point flew upon Cormac's hand, and he was wounded in the thumb. The joint was cleft, and blood dropped upon the hide. Thereupon folk went between them and stayed the fight.

Then said Cormac, "This is a mean victory that Bersi has gained; it is only from my bad luck; and yet we must part."

* To take one after another.

† The sword then used was straight and two-edged, with a double ridge down the middle of the blade. The ridge stopped short within some inches of the point, leaving the tip flat and thin.

He flung down his sword, and it met Bersi's target. A shard was broken out of Sköfnung, and fire flew out of Thorveig's gift.

Bersi asked the money for release, Cormac said it would be paid ; and so they parted.

ON THE SCENE OF THE FIGHT.

This chapter is a *locus classicus* for the holmgang, and very curious in its account of the half-religious ceremony of heathen times, which developed, in the Christian middle age, into the distinctly religious observance of the ordeal of battle.

As to the scene of the fight ; it is at a place well chosen in this instance as being out of the sphere of influence of either party, but equally accessible to both. As its name implies, Leidhólm (the island on the path) lies on the public way, and was one of the recognised meeting places for trial by combat. Bersi would reach it by an easy day's ride through Svínadal and along the shore of Hvammsfiord, and Cormac in about the same distance over the moors, crossing Hrútafiord and coming down Laxárdal.

Middal is a long valley opening out at the point where the shore of Hvammsfiord bends up to the north. It is the valley in which lies Saudafell, celebrated in later history. Its river, Midá, for some distance before it meets the sea, spreads out among flats, and creates swamps thickly grown with coarse grass and rushes ; among which here and there are plots of land, solid underfoot, finely turfed and lawn-like, though hardly above the level of the streams that enclose them,—*holmes* in the true meaning of the word. One of these is still shown as the site of the holmgang, Leidhólm and Orresthólm in the Saga, Leidarhólm to-day.

It is rather a scramble, even under the guidance of the bóndi of Harrastadir, the neighbouring farm, to get through the deep swamps, for the channels of these rivers must have shifted in the course of centuries and the path passes a little higher up at present. But once on the holme, the suitability of the site is apparent :—a flat, broad, hard field, such as you see but rarely in Iceland, and large enough not only for the fighters but also for the spectators. You understand why the fight was on a holme,—not merely to cut off retreat,—for that was done by the lists and limits described ; but in a country essentially uneven, being all rocks or mires from the hill-tops to the sea-line, they wanted a fair field and no favour, for absolute justice in the trial.

From Leidarhólm the farm of Saudafell is seen not far up the valley, on



Hvamsfjord from Saudafell, looking down to Leidarhólm.

W. S. Collins, 1900.

the flank of a rounded grassy hill, with snow peaks in the distance behind it: and turning in the opposite direction you can look up the two arms of Hvammsfiord,—on the right hand toward Queen Aud's Hvamm partly hidden by the hilly shore on which stands the ruin of Hrút's hall and temple, scene of incidents in *Njála* and *Laxdæla*; while to the left looking seaward you can make out the twin peaks of the Dimunar-klakkar, where Eric the Red hid his ship before starting on the voyage in which he discovered Greenland. Every foot of the soil is historic; it is the meeting point of many sagamemories, for the actors in all the great stories of the Viking age have trodden the spot.

After this fight Cormac went south, a day's ride over the mountains, to see his uncle Steinar at Ellidi. It is a homestead on the southern slope of the great ridge of Snæfellsnes, overlooking the broad fields of the foreshore, sunny and populous, with a great sweep of romantic coast on either hand embracing the bay of Faxaflói.

CHAPTER XI.—THE SONGS THAT WERE MADE ABOUT THE FIGHT.

STEINAR was the name of a man who was the son of Onund the Seer, and brother of Dalla, Cormac's mother. He was an unpeaceful man, and lived at Ellidi.

Thither rode Cormac from the holme, to see his kinsman, and told him of the fight, at which he was but ill pleased. Cormac said he meant to leave the country,—“And I want thee to take the money to Bersi.”

“Thou art no bold man,” said Steinar, “but the money shall be paid if need be.”

Cormac was there some nights; his hand swelled much, for it was not dressed.

After that meeting, Holmgang Bersi went to see his brother. Folk asked how the holmgang had gone, and when he told them they said that two bold men had struck small blows, and he had gained the victory only through Cormac's mishap. When Bersi met Steingerd, and she asked how it went, he made this verse:—

(27)

“They call him, and truly they tell it,
A tree of the helmet right noble:
But the master of manhood must bring me
Three marks for his ransom and rescue.
Though stout in the storm of the bucklers
In the stress of the Valkyrie's tempest
He will bid me no more to the battle,
For the best of the struggle was ours.”

Steinar and Cormac rode from Ellidi and passed through Saurbæ. They saw men riding towards them, and yonder came Bersi. He greeted Cormac and asked how the wound was getting on. Cormac said it needed little to be healed.

“Wilt thou let me heal thee?” said Bersi; “though from me thou didst get it: and then it will be soon over.”*

Cormac said nay, for he meant to be his lifelong foe. Then answered Bersi:—

(28)

“Thou wilt mind thee for many a season
How we met in the high voice of Hilda.†
Right fain I go forth to the spear-mote
Being fitted for every encounter.
There Cormac’s gay shield from his clutches
I clave with the bane of the bucklers,
For he scorned in the battle to seek me
If we set not the lists of the holmgang.”

Thus they parted; and then Cormac went home to Mel and saw his mother. She healed his hand; it had become ugly and healed badly. The notch in Sköfnung they whetted, but the more they whetted the bigger it was. So he went to Reykir, and flung Sköfnung at Skeggi’s feet, with this verse:—

(29)

“I bring thee, thus broken and edgeless,
The blade that thou gavest me, Skeggi!
I warrant thy weapon could bite not:
I won not the fight by its witchcraft.
No gain of its virtue nor glory
I got in the strife of the weapons,
When we met for to mingle the sword-storm
For the maiden my singing adorns.”

Said Skeggi, “It went as I warned thee.” Cormac flung forth

* Meaning, perhaps, to heal the wound with the “life-stone” in the hilt of his sword; see note to chap. ix.

† The shouting of the war-goddess, battle.

and went home to Mel : and when he met with Dalla he made this song :—

(30)

“To the field went I forth, O my mother
The flame of the armlet who guardest,—
To dare the cave-dweller, my foeman*
And I deemed I should smite him in battle.
But the brand that is bruited in story
It brake in my hand as I held it;
And this that should thrust men to slaughter
Is thwarted and let of its might.

(31)

For I borrowed to bear in the fighting
No blunt-edgéd weapon of Skeggi:
There is strength in the serpent that quivers
By the side of the land of the girdle.
But vain was the virtue of Sköfnung
When he vanquished the sharpness of Whitting;
And a shard have I shorn, to my sorrow,
From the shearer of ringleted mail.

(32)

Yon tusker,* my foe, wrought me trouble
When targe upon targe I had carven:
For the thin wand of slaughter was shattered
And it sundered the ground of my handgrip.
Loud bellowed the bear of the sea-king
When he brake from his lair in the scabbard,
At the hest of the singer, who seeketh
The sweet hidden draught of the gods.

(33)

Afar must I fare, O my mother,
And a fate points the pathway before me,

* Cave-dweller, and tusker, a play on the name Bersi, the bear.

For that white-wreathen tree I may woo not
—Two wearisome morrows her outcast.
And it slays me, at home to be sitting,
So set is my heart on its goddess,
As a lawn with fair linen made lovely
—I can linger no third morrow's morn."

After that, Cormac went one day to Reykir and talked with Skeggi, who said the holmgang had been brought to scorn. Then answered Cormac :—

(34)

"Forget it, O Frey of the helmet,
—Lo, I frame thee a song in atonement—
That the bringer of blood, even Sköfnung,
I bare thee so strangely belated.
For by stirrers of storm was I wounded ;
They smote me where perches the falcon :
But the blade that I borrowed, O Skeggi,
Was borne in the clashing of edges.

(35)

I had deemed, O thou Frey of the fighting,
Of the fierce song of Odin,—my neighbour,
I had deemed that a brand meet for bloodshed
I bare to the crossways of slaughter.
Nay,—thy glaive, it would gape not nor ravin
Against him, the rover who robbed me :
And on her, as the surge on the shingle,
My soul beats and breaks evermore."

CHAPTER XII.—BERSI'S BAD LUCK AT THE THOR'S-NESS THING.

IN the winter, sports were held at Saurbæ. Bersi's lad, Asmund, was there, and likewise the sons of Thórd; but they were younger than he, and nothing like so sturdy. When they wrestled Asmund took no heed to stint his strength, and the sons of Thórd often came home blue and bleeding. Their mother Thórdís was ill pleased, and asked her husband would he give Bersi a hint to make it up on behalf of his son. Nay, Thórd answered, he was loath to do that.

“Then I'll find my brother Börk,” said she, “and it will be just as bad in the end.”

Thórd bade her do no such thing. “I would rather talk it over with him,” said he; and so, at her wish, he met Bersi, and hinted that some amends were owing.

Said Bersi, “Thou art far too greedy of getting, nowadays. This kind of thing will end in losing thee thy good name. Thou wilt never want while anything is to be got here.”

Thórd went home, and there was a coolness between them while that winter lasted.

Spring slipped by, until it was time for the meeting at Thor's-ness. By then, Bersi thought he saw through this claim of Thórd's, and found Thórdís at the bottom of it. For all that, he made ready to go to the Thing. By old use and wont these two neighbours should have gone riding together; so Bersi set out and came to Múli, but when he got there Thórd was gone.

“Well,” said he, “Thórd has broken old use and wont in awaiting me no longer.”

“If breach there be,” answered Thórdís, “it is thy doing. This is nothing to what we owe thee, and I doubt there will be more to follow.”



Thorsness-thing, with Helgafell in the distance to the right. In the centre are ruins of the booths, the Doon-ring, and Thor's stone.

They had words. Bersi said that harm would come of her evil counsel ; and so they parted.

When he left the house he said to his men, " Let us turn aside to the shore and take a boat ; it is a long way to ride round the waterhead." * So they took a boat—it was one of Thórd's—and went their way.

They came to the meeting when most other folk were already there, and went to the tent of Olaf Peacock of Hjardarholt (Herdholt), for he was Bersi's chief. It was crowded inside, and Bersi found no seat. He used to sit next Thórd, but that place was filled. In it there sat a big and strong-looking man, with a bear-skin coat, and a hood that shaded his face. Bersi stood a while before him, but the seat was not given up. He asked the man for his name, and was told he might call him Bruin, or he might call him Hoodie—which-ever he liked ; whereupon he said in verse :—

(36)

" Who sits in the seat of the warriors,
With the skin of the bear wrapped around him,
So wild in his look ?—Ye have welcomed
A wolf to your table, good kinsfolk !
Ah, now may I know him, I reckon !
Doth he name himself Bruin, or Hoodie ?—
We shall meet once again in the morning,
And maybe he'll prove to be—Steinar."

" And it's no use for thee to hide thy name, thou in the bearskin," said he.

" No more it is," he answered. " Steinar I am, and I have brought money to pay thee for Cormac, if so be it is needed. But

* Of Hvammsfjord. It is about 33 miles by boat from Tjaldanes to Thorsnes, but much more than twice the distance by land. For a description of Thorsnes, see the end of this chapter.

first I bid thee to fight. It will have to be seen whether thou get the two marks of silver, or whether thou lose them both."

Upon which quoth Bersi :—

(37)

" They that waken the storm of the spear-points—
For slaughter and strife they are famous—
To the island they bid me for battle,
Nor bitter I think it nor woeful ;
For long in that craft am I learned
To loosen the Valkyrie's tempest
In the lists, and I fear not to fight them—
Unflinching in battle am I.

Well I wot, though," said he, " that ye and your gang mean to make away with me. But I would let you know that I too have something to say about it — something that will set down your swagger, maybe."

" It is not thy death we are seeking," answered Steinar ; " all we want is to teach thee thy true place."

Bersi agreed to fight him, and then went out to a tent apart and took up his abode there.

Now one day the word went round for bathing in the sea. Said Steinar to Bersi, " Wilt try a race with me, Bersi ?"

" I have given over swimming," said he, " and yet I'll try."

Bersi's manner of swimming was to breast the waves and strike out with all his might. In so doing he showed a charm he wore round his neck. Steinar swam at him and tore off the lucky-stone with the bag it was in, and threw them both into the water, saying in verse :—

(38)

" Long I've lived,
And I've let the gods guide me ;

Brown hose I never wore
To bring the luck beside me.
I've never knit
All to keep me thriving
Round my neck a bag of worts,
—And lo! I'm living!"

Upon that they struck out to land.

But this turn that Steinar played was Thórd's trick to make Bersi lose his luck in the fight. And Thórd went along the shore at low water and found the luck-stone, and hid it away.

Now Steinar had a sword that was called after Skrymir the giant: it was never fouled, and no mishap followed it. On the day fixed, Thórd and Steinar went out of the tent, and Cormac also came to the meeting to hold the shield for Steinar. Olaf Peacock got men to help Bersi at the fight, for Thórd had been used to hold his shield, but this time failed him. So Bersi went to the trysting-place with a shield-bearer who is not named in the story, and with the round target that once had belonged to Thorveig.

Each man was allowed three shields. Bersi cut up two, and then Cormac took the third. Bersi hacked away, but Whitting his sword stuck fast in the iron border of Steinar's shield. Cormac whirled it up just when Steinar was striking out. He struck the shield-edge, and the sword glanced off, slit Bersi's buttock, sliced his thigh down to the knee-joint, and stuck in the bone. And so Bersi fell.

"There!" cried Steinar, "Cormac's fine is paid."

But Bersi leapt up, slashed at him, and clove his shield. The sword-point was at Steinar's breast when Thórd rushed forth and dragged him away, out of reach.

"There!" cried Thórd to Bersi, "I have paid thee for the mauling of my sons."

- - -

So Bersi was carried to the tent, and his wound was dressed.
After a while, Thórd came in ; and when Bersi saw him he said :—

(39)

“When the wolf of the war-god* was howling
Erstwhile in the north, thou didst aid me :
When it gaped in my hand, and it girded
At the Valkyries’ gate† for to enter.
But now wilt thou never, O warrior,
At need in the storm-cloud of Odin‡
Give me help in the tempest of targes‡
—Untrusty, unfaithful art thou.

(40)

“For when I was a stripling I showed me
To the stems of the lightning of battle
Right meet for the mist of the war-maids ; ‡
—Ah me ! that was said long ago.
But now, and I may not deny it
My neighbours in earth must entomb me,
At the spot I have sought for my grave-mound
Where Saurbæ lies level and green.”

Said Thórd, “I have no wish for thy death ; but I own it is
no sorrow to see thee brought down for once.”

To which Bersi answered in song :—

(41)

“The friend that I trusted has failed me
In the fight, and my hope is departed :
I speak what I know of ; and note it,
Ye nobles,—I tell ye no leasing.
Lo, the raven is ready for carnage,
But rare are the friends who should succour.
Yet still let them scorn me and threaten,
I shrink not, I am not dismayed.”

* Sword. † Shield. ‡ Valkyries’ storm, battle.

After this, Bersi was taken home to Saurbæ, and lay long in his wounds.

But when he was carried into the tent, at that very moment Steinar spoke thus to Cormac:—

(42)

“Of the reapers in harvest of Hilda
—Thou hast heard of it—four men and eight men
With the edges of Skrymir to aid me
I have urged to their flight from the battle.
Now the singer, the steward of Odin,
Hath smitten at last even Bersi
With the flame of the weapon that feedeth
The flocks of the carrion crows.”

“I would have thee keep Skrymir now for thy own, Cormac,” said he, “because I mean this fight to be my last.”

After that, they parted in friendly wise: Steinar went home, and Cormac fared to Mel.



The Thorstone at Thorsness-thing.

ON THE THING-STEAD OF THOR'S NESS.

On the north side of Snæfellsnes there is a little peninsula, sharply rhomboidal or diamond-shaped, and about seven miles across from farthest corner to corner. It is joined to the mainland by a narrow isthmus, and fringed with innumerable islets where the eider ducks breed. In the very middle of it, surrounded by rough, undulating moors, rises Helgafell, the holy mountain, a steep rocky hill of no great height, in which the dead were thought to dwell; and beside which Snorri the priest lived and the heroine Guðrún was buried. On the south-western shore Thorolf Mostrarskeggi set up his famous temple of Thor, from which the whole ness got its name. But when the original holy place was defiled with blood-shedding (about the year 935) the temple was moved to Helgafell, and the Thing-stead to the eastern corner of the peninsula, where its remains can be seen to this day.

They lie on three little promontories, divided by little "voes" which bring the salt water up between them at high tide. At the ebb the bays are nearly empty, and there is a space of reef and foreshore, thick with seaweed, exposed beyond the points of land. It was there that Bersi swam against Steinar, and Thórd groped for the luck-stone when the tide was out.

On the highest of the promontories is a castle-like hill called Thingvallaborg (Thing-fields-castle). But on the two lower nesses, on the green banks above the sharply defined rocky edge, are many remains of "booths,"—the roofless buildings temporarily covered with a tent, in which Olaf Peacock and the other chiefs lodged themselves and their followers at the time of meeting. The number of these booths would show that Thorsness-thing was well frequented, even if we did not know that Thórd Gellir made it the central meeting of all the west country,—in fact the most important in Iceland next to the Althing.

On the level ground between the two lower nesses is a boulder, standing about four feet out of the ground, which is pointed out as the Stone of Sacrifice, mentioned in *Eyrbyggja* as the Stone of Thor on which human victims were "broken." The Saga goes on to say that the colour of their blood was still to be seen on the stone: and there is indeed a brown stain on it sharply contrasting with the whitish gray of its weathered surface, and

the bright green patches of moss: but the modern traveller would rather ascribe the colour to nature's painting than to any heathen ritual. *Eyrbyggja* says also that the stone was in the Doom-ring where men were doomed to this sacrifice: if we read "near the Doom-ring" the Saga stands corrected, for the present writers proved by digging (in June 1897) that no circle enclosed the stone, while they found at a hundred paces off, on the point of the southernmost ness, a ruined circle which, from its position, could hardly have been a sheep-fold or any farmer's work, though it answers to the description of a Doom-ring, or ring of seats on which judges sat in council. The ancients put their Doom-ring in an isolated spot, not to be overheard: at the Althing the similar structure (destroyed in 1724) was on the ridge of the lower wall of the Almannagjá: here it is at the point of a sharp ness, beyond the last of the booths, and overlooking the sea, and the islands, and distant snowy mountains in a noble panorama.

Our Saga, with a dramatic narrative's disdain for all but the human interest, tells us nothing of the scenes in which the play was enacted: but once on the spot, you find its little sketchy hints of place and circumstance startling in their veracity; and the real men and women it portrays to the life, live again in the real surroundings of their loves and wars,—in a landscape setting no less romantic than the ancient story.

Here ends the story of Cormac for the present, closing the earlier part of his life. But as the tale has come to speak much of Holmgang Bersi, the Saga-teller goes on to finish his fortunes before taking up the thread afresh and giving the second part of Cormac. These chapters (xiii.—xvi.) are no doubt part of the lost Bersa-saga, to which we have alluded in the introduction.

CHAPTER XIII.—STEINGERD LEAVES BERSI.

NEXT it is told of Bersi. His wound healed but slowly. Once on a time a many folk were met to talk about that meeting and what came of it, and Bersi made this song :—

(43)

“Thou didst leave me forlorn to the sword-stroke,
Strong lord of the field of the serpent!
And needy and fallen ye find me,
Since my foeman ye shielded from danger.
Thus cunning and counsel are victors,
When the craft of the spear-shaft avails not;
But this, as I think, is the ending,
O Thórd, of our friendship for ever!”

A while later Thórd came to his bedside and brought back the luck-stone; and with it he healed Bersi, and they took to their friendship again and held it unbroken ever after.

Because of these happenings, Steingerd fell into loathing of Bersi and made up her mind to part with him; and when she had got everything ready for going away she went to him and said :—
“First ye were called Eygla’s-Bersi, and then Holmgang-Bersi, but now your right name will be Breech-Bersi!” and spoke her divorce from him.

She went north to her kinsfolk, and meeting with her brother Thorkel she bade him seek her goods again from Bersi—her pin-money and her dowry, saying that she would not own him now that he was maimed. Thorkel Toothgnasher never blamed her for that, and agreed to undertake her errand; but the winter slipped by and his going was put off.



Váli's home at Hvol in Saurbæ.

CHAPTER XIV.—THE BANE OF THORKEL TOOTH-GNASHER.

AFTERWARDS, in the spring, Thorkel Toothgnasher set out to find Bersi and to seek Steingerd's goods again. Bersi said that his burden was heavy enough to bear, even though both together underwent the weight of it. "And I shall not pay the money!" said he.

Said Thorkel, "I bid thee to the holmgang at Orrestholm beside Tjaldanes (Tentness)."

"That ye will think hardly worth while," said Bersi, "such a champion as you are; and yet I undertake for to come."

So they came to the holme and fell to the holmgang. Thórd carried the shield before Bersi, and Váli was Thorkel's shield-bearer. When two shields had been hacked to splinters, Bersi bade Thorkel take the third; but he would not. Bersi still had a shield, and a sword that was long and sharp.

Said Thorkel, "The sword ye have, Bersi, is longer than lawful."

"That shall not be," cried Bersi; and took up his other sword, Whitting, two-handed, and smote Thorkel his deathblow. Then sang he:—

(44)

"I have smitten Toothgnasher and slain him,
And I smile at the pride of his boasting.
One more to my thirty I muster,
And, men! say ye this of the battle:—
In the world not a lustier liveth
Among lords of the steed of the oar-bench;
Though by eld of my strength am I stinted
To stain the black wound-bird with blood."

After these things Váli bade Bersi to the holmgang, but he answered in this song:—

(45)

"They that waken the war of the mail-coats,
 For warfare and manslaying famous,
 To the lists they have bid me to battle,
 Nor bitter I think it nor woeful.
 It is sport for yon swordsmen who goad me
 To strive in the Valkyries' tempest
 On the holme; but I fear not to fight them—
 Unflinching in battle am I!"

They were even about to begin fighting, when Thórd came and spoke to them saying:—"Woeful waste of life I call it, if brave men shall be smitten down for the sake of any such matters. I am ready to make it up between ye two."

To this they agreed, and he said:—"Váli, this methinks is the most likely way of bringing you together. Let Bersi take thy sister Thórdís to wife. It is a match that may well be to thy worship."

Bersi agreed to this, and it was settled that the land of Brekka should go along with her as a dowry; and so this troth was plighted between them. Bersi afterwards had a strong stone wall built around his homestead, and sat there for many winters in peace.

CHAPTER XV.—THE RESCUE OF STEINVÖR SLIM-ANKLES.

THERE was a man named Thórarin Alfsson, who lived in the north at Thambardal; that is a dale which goes up from the fiord called Bitra. He was a big man and mighty, and he was by-named Thórarin the Strong. He had spent much of his time in seafaring (as a chapman) and so lucky was he that he always made the harbour he aimed at.

He had three sons; one was named Alf, the next Loft, and the third Skofti. Thórarin was a most overbearing man, and his sons took after him. They were rough, noisy fellows.

Not far away, at Túnga (Tongue) in Bitra,* lived a man called Odd. His daughter was named Steinvör, a pretty girl and well set up; her by-name was Slim-ankles. Living with Odd were many fishermen; among them, staying there for the fishing-season, was one Glúm, an ill-tempered carle and bad to deal with.

Now once upon a time these two, Odd and Glúm, were in talk together which were the greatest men in the countryside. Glúm reckoned Thórarin to be foremost, but Odd said Holmgang Bersi was better than he in every way.

“How can ye make that out?” asked Glúm.

“Is there any likeness whatever,” said Odd, “between the bravery of Bersi and the knavery of Thórarin?”

So they talked about this until they fell out, and laid a wager upon it.

Then Glúm went and told Thórarin. He grew very angry and made many a threat against Odd. And in a while he went and carried off Steinvör from Túnga, all to spite her father; and he gave out that if Odd said anything against it, the worse for him: and so took her home to Thambardal.

* That is, Snartartúnga at the head of the fiord.



Snartartunga.

Things went on so for a while, and then Odd went to see Holmgang Bersi, and told him what had happened. He asked him for help to get Steinvör back and to wreak vengeance for that shame. Bersi answered that such words had been better unsaid, and bade him go home and take no share in the business: "But yet," added he, "I promise that I will see to it."

No sooner was Odd gone than Bersi made ready to go from home. He rode fully armed, with Whitting at his belt, and three spears; he came to Thambardal when the day was far spent and the women were coming out of the bower. Steinvör saw him and turning to meet him told of her unhappiness.

"Make ready to go with me," said he; and that she did.

He would not go to Thambardal for nothing, he said; and so he turned to the door where men were sitting by long fires.* He knocked at the door, and out there came a man—his name was Thorleif. But Thórarin knew Bersi's voice, and rushed forth with a great carving-knife and laid on to him. Bersi was aware of it, and drew Whitting, and struck him his death-blow.

Then he leapt on horseback and set Steinvör on his knee and took his spears which she had kept for him. He rode some way into the wood, where in a hidden spot he left his horse and Steinvör, bidding her await him. Then he went to a narrow gap through which the high-road ran, and there made ready to stand against his foes.

In Thambardal there was anything but peace. Thorleif ran to tell the sons of Thórarin that he lay dead in the doorway. They asked who had done the deed. He told them. Then they went after Bersi and steered the shortest way to the gap, meaning to get there first; but by that time he was already first at the gap.

* The long hearths down the middle of the floor, in the ancient hall.



Bitra, with Thambardal to the left.

When they came near him, Bersi hurled a spear at Alf, and it went right through him. Then Loft cast at Bersi, but he caught the spear on his target and it dropped off. Then Bersi threw at Loft and killed him, and so he did by Skofti.

When all was over, the house-carles of the brothers came up. Thorleif turned back to meet them, and they all went home together.

After that Bersi went to find Steinvör, and mounted his horse. He came home before men were out of bed. They asked him about his journey and he told them. When Odd met him he asked about the fight and how it had passed, and Bersi answered in this verse:—

(46)

“There was one fed the wolves has encountered
His weird in the dale of the Bowstring—*
Thórarin the Strong, 'neath the slayer
Lay slain by the might of my weapon.
And loss of their lives men abided
When Loft fell, and Alf fell, and Skofti.
They were four, yonder kinsmen, and fated—
They were fey—and I met them, alone!”

After that Odd went home, but Steinvör was with Bersi, though it misliked Thórdís, his wife. By this time his stone wall was somewhat broken down, but he had it built up again; and it is said that no blood-money was ever paid for Thórarin and his sons. So the time went on.

* i.e. Thambardal. In the next line the accent on the *ð* is only the diacritical mark of the Icelandic vowel, and does not mean that “Thórarin” is to be pronounced as a dactyl. The *a* is accented or pronounced long (“Thór-árin”), though it is not the Icelandic *á*, pronounced like the *ow* in “cow.”

CHAPTER XVI.—HOW VALI FELL BEFORE AN OLD
MAN AND A BOY.

ONCE on a day when Thórdís and Bersi were talking together, said he, "I have been thinking I might ask Olaf Peacock for a child of his to foster."

"Nay," said she, "I think little of that. It seems to me a great trouble, and I doubt if folk will reckon more of us for it."

"It means that I should have a sure friend," answered he. "I have many foes, and I am growing heavy with age."

So he went to see Olaf, and asked for a child to foster. Olaf took it with thanks, and Bersi carried Halldór home with him and got Steinvör to be nurse. This too disliked Thórdís, and she laid hands on every penny she could get [for fear it should go to Steinvör and the foster-child].

At last Bersi took to ageing much. There was one time when men riding to the Thing stayed at his house. He sat all by himself, and his food was brought him before the rest were served. He had porridge while other folk had cheese and curds. Then he made this verse :—

(47)

"To batten the black-feathered wound-bird
With the blade of my axe have I stricken
Full thirty and five of my foemen ;
I am famed for the slaughter of warriors.
May the fiends have my soul if I stain not
My sharp-edgèd falchion once over !
And then let the breaker of broadswords
Be borne—and with speed—to the grave !"

"What?" said Halldór; "hast thou a mind to kill another man, then?"

Answered Bersi, "I see the man it would rightly serve!"

Now Thórdís let her brother Váli feed his herds on the land of Brekka. Bersi bade his house-carles work at home, and have no dealings with Váli; but still Halldór thought it a hardship that Bersi had not his own will with his own wealth. One day Bersi made this verse :—

(48)

“ Here we lie,
Both on one settle—
Halldór and I,
Men of no mettle.
Youth ails thee,
But thou’lt win through it;
Age ails me,
And I must rue it ! ” *

“ I do hate Váli,” said Halldór; and Bersi answered thus in verse :—

(49)

“ Yon Váli, so wight as he would be,
Well wot I our pasture he grazes;
Right fain yonder fierce helmet-wearer
Under foot my dead body would trample!
But often my wrongs have I wreaked
In wrath on the mail-coated warrior—
On the stems of the sun of the ocean†
I have stained the wound-serpent‡ for less ! ”

And again he said :—

* This verse, with its terminal rhyme in the original Icelandic, is nearly the same with one attributed to Bersi in the *Laxdæla-saga*, when he was bedfast with rheumatism or some similar ailment of age, and the baby Halldór upset his cradle and rolled out of it. All the housefolk were out in the hay, and the old man could do nothing but versify the situation.

† A “ *mannkenning* ”: those who wear or bear the glittering gold, as in the second line of No. 50.

‡ Sword or spear.

(50)

"With eld am I listless and lamed—
 I, the lord of the gold of the armlet :
 I sit, and am still under many
 A slight from the warders of spear-meads.*
 Though shield-bearers shape for the singer
 To shiver alone in the grave-mound,
 Yet once in the war would I ridden
 The wand that hews helms ere I fail."

"Thy heart is not growing old, foster-father mine!" cried Halldór.

Upon that Bersi fell into talk with Steinvör, and said to her, "I am laying a plot, and I need thee to help me."

She said she would if she could.

"Pick a quarrel," said he, "with Thórdís about the milk-kettle, and do thou hold on to it until you whelm it over between you. Then I will come in and take her part and give thee nought but bad words. Then go to Váli and tell him how ill we treat thee."

Everything turned out as he had planned. She went to Váli and told him that things were no way smooth for her; would he take her over the gap (to Bitra to her father's :) and so he did.

But when he was on the way back again, out came Bersi and Halldór to meet him. Bersi had a halberd in one hand and a staff in the other, and Halldór had Whitting. As soon as Váli saw them he turned and hewed at Bersi. Halldór came at his back and fleshed Whitting in his hough-sinews. Thereupon he turned sharply and fell upon Halldór. Then Bersi set the halberd-point betwixt his shoulders. That was his death-wound.

Then they set his shield at his feet and his sword at his head,

* A spear-mead or field of the spear is the shield, on which the spears stick like grass-blades in a meadow, and the warder of the shield is the warrior,

and spread his cloak over him ; and after that got on horseback and rode to five homesteads to make known the deed they had done* and then rode home. Men went and buried Váli, and the place where he fell has ever since been called Váli's fall.

Hallidór was twelve winters old when these doings came to pass.

* By declaring the slaughter at five houses it was reckoned a fair fight, and not a treacherous murder. Revenge or atonement was still called for, but not the punishment of outlawry.

CHAPTER XXV.—HOW THEY CRUISED WITH THE KING'S FLEET, AND QUARRELLED, AND MADE IT UP.

IN the following spring King Harald set forth to the land of Permia with a great host. Cormac was one of the captains in that warfaring, and in another ship was Thorvald: the other captains of ships are not named in our story.

Now as they were all sailing in close order through a narrow sound, Cormac swung his steering-oar and hit Thorvald a clout on the ear, so that he fell from his place at the helm in a swoon; and Cormac's ship hove to, when she lost her rudder. Steingerd had been sitting beside Thorvald; she did hold of the tiller, and ran Cormac down. When he saw what she was doing, he sang:—

(78)

“There is one that is nearer and nigher
To the noblest of dames than her lover:
With the haft of the helm is he smitten
On the hat-block—and fairly amidships!
The false heir of Eystein—he falters—
He falls in the poop of his galley!
Nay! steer not upon me, O Steingerd,
Though stoutly ye carry the day!”

So Cormac's ship capsized under him; but his crew were saved without loss of time, for there were plenty of people round about. Thorvald soon came round again, and they all went on their way. The king offered to settle the matter between them; and when they both agreed, he gave judgment that Thorvald's hurt was atoned for by Cormac's upset.

In the evening they went ashore, and the king and his men sat down to supper. Cormac was sitting outside the door of a tent, drinking out of the same cup with Steingerd. While they were busy at it, a young fellow for mere sport and mockery stole the brooch out of Cormac's fur cloak, which he had doffed and laid

aside; and when he came to take his cloak again, the brooch was gone. He sprang up and rushed after the young fellow, with the spear that he called Vigr (the spear) and shot at him, but missed. This was the song he made about it:—

(79)

“The youngster has pilfered my pin,
As I pledged the gay dame in the beaker;
And now must we brawl for a brooch
Like boys when they wrangle and tussle.
Right well have I shafted my spear,
Though I shot nothing more than the gravel:
But sure, if I missed at my man,
The moss has been prettily slaughtered!”

After this they went on their way to the land of Permia, and after that they went home again to Norway.

CHAPTER XVII.—HOW STEINGERD WAS MARRIED AGAIN.

NOW there was a man named Thorvald, the son of Eystein, bynamed the Tinker: he was a wealthy man, a smith, and a skald; but he was mean-spirited for all that. His brother Thorvard lived in the north country at Fliót (Fleet*); and they had many kinsmen,—the Skiding† they were called,—but little luck or liking.

Now Thorvald the Tinker asked Steingerd to wife. Her folk were for it, and she said nothing against it; and so she was wed to him in the very same summer in which she left Bersi.

When Cormac heard the news he made as though he knew nothing whatever about the matter; for a little earlier he had taken his goods aboard ship, meaning to go away with his brother. But one morning early he rode from the ship and went to see Steingerd; and when he got talk with her, he asked would she make him a shirt. To which she answered that he had no business to pay her visits; neither Thorvald nor his kinsmen would abide it, she said, but have their revenge.

Thereupon he made this verse:—

(51)

“Nay, think it or thole it I cannot,
That thou, a young fir of the forest
Enwreathed in the gold that thou guardest,
Shouldst be given to a tinkering tinsmith.
Nay, scarce can I smile, O thou glittering
In silk like the goddess of Baldur,
Since thy father handfasted and pledged thee,
So famed as thou art, to a coward.”

“In such words,” answered Steingerd, “an ill will is plain to

* Supposed to be in the Skagafjord district, north east of Midfjord.

†That is, the kinsmen of Skidi.

hear. I shall tell Thorvald of this ribaldry: no man would sit still under such insults."

Then sang Cormac:—

(52)

"What gain is to get if he threaten,
White goddess in raiment of beauty,
The scorn that the Skidings may bear me?
I'll set them a weft for their weaving!
I'll rhyme you the roystering caitiffs
Till rocks go afloat on the water;
And lucky for them if they loosen
The line of their fate that I ravel!"

Thereupon they parted with no blitheness, and Cormac went to his ship.



Scenery of the North Coast : Cape Horn.

CHAPTER XVIII.—CORMAC'S VOYAGE TO NORWAY.

THE two brothers had but left the roadstead, when close beside their ship, uprose a walrus. Cormac hurled at it a pole-staff, which struck the beast, so that it sank again: but the men aboard thought that they knew its eyes for the eyes of Thorveig the witch. That walrus came up no more, but of Thorveig it was heard that she lay sick to death; and indeed folk say that this was the end of her.

Then they sailed out to sea, and at last came to Norway, where at that time Hákon, the foster-son of Athelstan, was king. He made them welcome, and so they stayed there the winter long with all honour.

Next summer they set out to the wars, and did many great deeds. Along with them went a man called Siegfried, a German of good birth; and they made raids both far and wide. One day as they were gone up the country eleven men together came against the two brothers, and set upon them; but this business ended in their overcoming the whole eleven, and so after a while back to their ship. The vikings had given them up for lost, and fain were their folk when they came back with victory and wealth.

In this voyage the brothers got great renown: and late in the summer, when winter was coming on, they made up their minds to steer for Norway. They met with cold winds; the sail was behung with icicles, but the brothers were always to the fore. It was on this voyage that Cormac made the song: --

(53)

“O shake me yon rime from the awning;
Your singer's a-cold in his berth;
For the hills are all hooded, dear Skardi,
In the hoary white veil of the firth.

There's one they call Wielder of Thunder*
I would were as chill and as cold;
But he leaves not the side of his lady
As the lindworm forsakes not its gold."†

"Always talking of her now!" said Thorgils; "and yet thou wouldst not have her when thou couldst."

"That was more the fault of witchcraft," answered Cormac, "that any want of faith in me."

Not long after they were sailing hard among crags, and shortened sail in great danger.

"It is a pity Thorvald Tinker is not with us here!" said Cormac.

Said Thorgils with a smile, "Most likely he is better off than we, to-day!"

But before long they came to land in Norway.

*That is, *Thor-vald* the Tinker.

† The Lindworm or dragon, as in the case of Fafnir in the Sigurd story, was supposed to brood over a hoard of treasure.

CHAPTER XIX.—HOW CORMAC FOUGHT IN IRELAND,
AND WENT HOME TO ICELAND; AND HOW HE MET
STEINGERD AGAIN.

WHILE they were abroad there had been a change of kings; Hákon was dead, and Harald Greyfell reigned in his stead. They offered friendship to the king, and he took their suit kindly; so they went with him to Ireland, and fought battles there.

Once upon a time when they had gone ashore with the king, a great host came against him, and as the armies met, Cormac made this song:—

(54)

“I dread not a death from the foemen,
Though we dash at them, buckler to buckler,
While our prince in the power of his warriors
Is proud of me foremost in battle.
But the glimpse of a glory comes o’er me
Like the gleam of the moon on the skerry,
And I faint and I fail for my longing,
For the fair one at home in the North.”

“Ye never get into danger,” said Thorgils,” “but ye think of Steingerd!”

“Nay,” answered Cormac, “but it’s not often I forget her.”

Well; this was a great battle, and king Harald won a glorious victory. While his men drove the rout before him, the brothers were shoulder to shoulder; and they fell upon nine men at once and fought them. And while they were at it, Cormac sang:—

(55)

“Fight on, arrow-driver, undaunted,
And down with the foemen of Harald!
What are nine? they are nought! Thou and I, lad,
Are enough;—they are ours!—we have won them!

- Declaring a slaughter, 99.
Dimunarklakkar, 71.
Divorce, 87.
Doomrings, 86.
Draupnir, 59.

Edda, 4, 9, 11, 47.
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Flíbt, 102, 114, 117.
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Fostering, 96.
FRODI, brother of Cormac, 10, 29, 46.
FRODI, Earl, 10, 27, 28.

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Giant, 134.
Gilsfiord, 50.
Gísli Brynjólfsson, Dr., 5.
GLUM the fisher, 91.
Gnúpsdal, 31, 32, 33, 38.

from the boat, and got a horse, and rode to meet her. When they met, he leapt from horseback and helped her to alight, making a seat for her beside him on the ground.

Their horses wandered away: the day passed on, and it began to grow dark. At last Steingerd said, "It is time to look for our horses."

Little search would be needed, said Cormac; but when he looked about, they were nowhere in sight. As it happened, they were hidden in a gill not far from where the two were sitting.

So, as night was hard at hand, they set out to walk, and came to a little farm, where they were taken in and treated well, even as they needed. That night they slept each on either side of the carved wainscot that parted bed from bed: and Cormac made this song:—

(59)

"We rest, O my beauty, my brightest,
But a barrier lies ever between us.
So fierce are the fates and so mighty
—I feel it—that rule to their rede.
Ah, nearer I would be, and nigher,
Till nought should be left to dispart us,
—The wielder of Sköfnung the wonder,
And the wearer of sheen from the deep."

"It was better thus," said Steingerd: but he sang:—

(60)

"We have slept 'neath one roof-tree—slept softly,
O sweet one, O queen of the mead-horn,
O glory of sea-dazzle gleaming,
These grim hours,—these five nights, I count them.
And here in the kettle-prow* cabined
While the crow's day drags on in the darkness,

* i.e. cabin where the kettle hangs, cottage.

How loathly me seems to be lying,
How lonely,—so near and so far!”

“That,” said she, “is all over and done with; name it no more.” But he sang:—

(61)

“The hot stone shall float,—ay, the hearth-stone
Like a husk of the corn on the water,
—Ah, woe for the wight that she loves not!—
And the world,—ah, she loathes me!—shall perish,
And the fells that are famed their hugeness
Shall fail and be drowned in the ocean,
Or ever so gracious a goddess
Shall grow into beauty like Steingerd.”

Then Steingerd cried out that she would not have him make songs upon her: but he went on:—

(62)

“I have known it and noted it clearly,
O neckleted fair one, in visions,
—Is it doom for my hopes,—is it daring
To dream?—O so oft have I seen it!—
Even this,—that the boughs of thy beauty,
O braceleted fair one, shall twine them
Round the hill where the hawk loves to settle,
The hand of thy lover, at last.”

“That,” said she, “never shall be, if I can help it. Thou didst let me go, once for all; and there is no more hope for thee.”

So then they slept the night long; and in the morning, when Cormac was making ready to be gone, he found Steingerd, and took the ring off his finger to give her.

“Fiend take thee and thy gold together!” she cried. And this is what he answered:—

- Saudafell, 69.
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Scarborough, 7, 134.
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Thórd Gellir, 85.

THORDIS, sister of Váli, 90, 95-98.

THORDIS the witch, 61, 119-125.

THORDIS, Thórd's wife, 53, 77.

THORGILS, Cormac's brother, 7, 10, 23, 29, 55-67, 106-108, 122, 128, 132, 136.

Thorgils son of Thorgils, 24.

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THORKEL of Túnga, 33, 38, 39, 41, 44, 53.

THORKEL Toothgnasher, 3, 47, 54, 87, 89.

THOROLF of Spákonufell, 119, 125.

THORLEIF at Thambardal, 93.

Thorsness-thing, 79-86.

Were turned to a steed in the stable
 —Called Steingerd—and I were the rider!
 I'd bit her, and bridle, and saddle,
 I'd back her and drive her and tame her;
 So many she owns for her masters,
 But mine she will never become!"

Then Steingerd grew exceedingly angry, so that she would not so much as hear Cormac named. When he heard that, he went to see her. Long time he tried in vain to get speech with her; but at last she gave this answer,—that she disliked his holding her up to shame,—“And now it is all over the country-side!”

Cormac said it was not true; but she answered, “Thou mightest flatly deny it, if I had not heard it.”

“Who sang it in thy hearing?” asked he.

She told him who sang it,—“And thou needest not hope for speech with me if this prove true.”

He rode away to look for the rascal, and when he found him the truth was forced out at last. Cormac was very angry, and set on Narfi and slew him. That same onset was meant for Thorvald, but he hid himself in the shadow and skulked, until men came between them and parted them. Said Cormac:—

(65)

“There, hide in the house like a coward,
 And hope not hereafter to scare me
 With the scorn of thy brethren the Skidings,—
 I'll set them a weft for their weaving!
 I'll rhyme on the swaggering rascals
 Till rocks go afloat on the water;
 And lucky for you if ye loosen
 The line of your fate that I ravel!”

This went all over the country-side and the feud grew fiercer between them. The brothers Thorvald and Thorvard used big words, and Cormac was wroth when he heard them.

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And this they shall feel in its fulness ;
 Here my fame has its birth and beginning ;
 And the stout spears of battle shall see it,
 If I 'scape from their hands with my life."

Then the brothers set on foot a law-suit against him for libel. Cormac's kinsmen backed him up to answer it, and he would let no terms be made, saying that they deserved the shame put upon them, and no honour ; he was not unready to meet them, unless they played him false. Thorvard had not come to the holmgang when he had been challenged, and therefore the shame had fallen of itself upon him and his, and they must put up with it.

So time passed until the Húna-water Thing. Thorvard and Cormac both went to the meeting, and once they came together.

"Much enmity we owe thee," said Thorvard, "and in many ways. Now therefore I challenge thee to the holmgang, here at the Thing."

Said Cormac, "Wilt thou be fitter than before? Thou hast drawn back time after time."

"Nevertheless," said Thorvard, "I will risk it. We can abide thy spite no longer."

"Well," said Cormac, "I'll not stand in the way ;" and went home to Mel.

CHAPTER XXII.—WHAT THE WITCH DID FOR THEM IN THEIR FIGHTS.

AT Spákonufell (Spae-wife's-fell) lived Thórdís the spae-wife, of whom we have told before, with her husband Thorolf. They were both at the Thing, and many a man thought her goodwill was of much avail. So Thorvard sought her out, to ask her help against Cormac, and gave her a fee ; and she made him ready for the holmgang according to her craft.

Now Cormac told his mother what was forward, and she asked if he thought good would come of it.

“ Why not ? ” said he.

“ That will not be enough for thee,” said Dalla. “ Thorvard will never make bold to fight without witchcraft to help him. I think it wise for thee to see Thórdís the spae-wife, for there is going to be foul play in this affair.”

“ It is little to my mind,” said he ; and yet went to see Thórdís, and asked her help.

“ Too late ye have come,” said she. “ No weapon will bite on him now. And yet I would not refuse thee. Bide here to-night, and seek thy good luck. Anyway, I can manage so that iron bite thee no more than him.”

So Cormac stayed there for the night ; and, awaking, found that some one was groping round the coverlet at his head. “ Who is there ? ” he asked ; but whoever it was made off, and out at the house-door, and Cormac after. And then he saw it was Thórdís, and she was going to the place where the fight was to be, carrying a goose under her arm.

He asked what it all meant, and she set down the goose, saying, “ Why couldn't ye keep quiet ? ”

So he lay down again, but held himself awake, for he wanted to know what she would be doing. Three times she came, and every



Spakonufell.

time he tried to find out what she was after. The third time, just as he came out, she had killed two geese and let the blood run into a bowl, and she had taken up the third goose to kill it.

"What means this business, foster-mother?" said he.

"True it will prove, Cormac, that you are a hard one to help," said she. "I was going to break the spell Thorveig laid on thee and Steingerd. Ye could have loved one another and been happy if I had killed the third goose and no one seen it."

"I believe nought of such things," cried he; and this song he made about it:—

(68)

"I gave her an ore at the ayre,*
That the arts of my foe should not prosper;
And twice she has taken the knife,
And twice she has offered the offering;
But the blood is the blood of a goose—
What boots it if two should be slaughtered?—
Never sacrifice geese for a Skald
Who sings for the glory of Odin!"

So they went to the holmgang: but Thorvald gave the spae-wife a still greater fee, and offered the sacrifice of geese; and Cormac said:—

(69)

"Trust never another man's mistress!
For I know, on this woman who weareth
The fire of the field of the sea-king
The fiends have been riding to revel.
The witch with her hoarse cry is working
For woe when we go to the holmgang;
And if bale be the end of the battle
The blame, be assured, will be hers."

* An ounce of silver at the promontory (like the "Point of Ayre" on the Dee, in the Isle of Man, and elsewhere). The iingle is Cormac's own—"Aura galk á eyri."

